

ねじ巻き精霊戦記
天鏡のアルデラミン
Alderamin on the Sky
XI
宇野朴人
…Uno Bokuto
…Illustration 竜徹
…キャラクター原案 さんば挿

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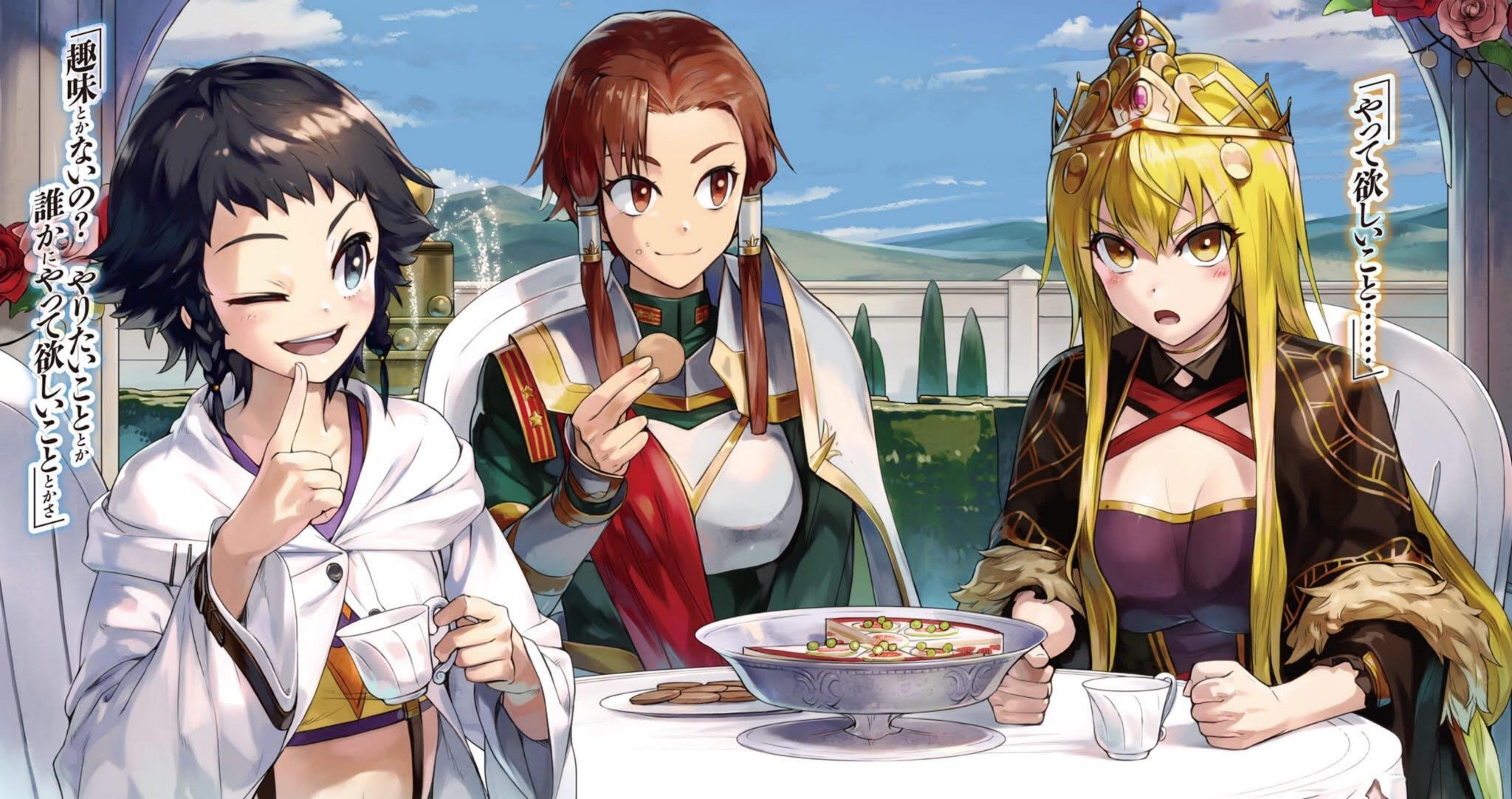
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「やって欲しいこと……」
「趣味とかないの? やりたいこととか誰かにやって欲しいこととかさ」


ねじ巻き精霊戦記


歴史に残る三国会議の幕が上がる——！
ILLUSTLATION:RYUTETSU
CHARACTER DESIGN:SOU SANBA
Alderamin on the Sky
UNO BOKUTO PRESENTS
XI

Chapter 1: Super Cool

The girl's body was burning up.

Her slender figure was pressed down on the bed, handled brutishly without any tenderness. The hand grabbing her skinny wrists and shoulders threatened to crush her bones, and were gradually increasing in power.

The dark pupils staring at the girl were dyed in layers of negative emotions, culminating in extreme darkness from the youth's lifetime of hatred. Enduring the ravages from his rage, the girl laid on her bed and panted.

However— on the other hand, there was a calm in her heart that contrasted with the painful hatred he was feeling.

Ever since she walked down the path of destruction, a distorted emotion welled up in the girl's heart. One day, she would be judged and punished by him. He would crush and end the bloodline of the Eternal Sprite Tree that had festered and rotted over the long years, deformed beyond recognition. And she, who was the crystallization of all that would be buried along with it. She could only feel a fleeting moment of peace when she imagined her death, the only thing that granted her permission to breathe.

However— the abstract wish in the beginning had started growing more realistic with the passage of time.

She couldn't help wondering how he would break her completely? What it would be like as he trampled and ravaged her? How did she

want him to treat her? — The girl filled in the tragic process with her imagination.

The youth's fingers sunk deep into her skin to tear away her clothes, revealing her breasts, his canines plunging into her shoulders, grinding away at her bones. Each wave of pain made the girl writhed in agony— and she drank all this up thirstily, and craved for further torment.

His bare hands would feel better than blades— since she could feel his body warmth.

She wanted him to humiliate her until she breathed her last— so she could stay by his side longer.

And not let her off no matter how much she pleaded— Because his hatred was righteous.

As he tortured her harshly, the girl would cry out the youth's name. To beg for forgiveness, to plead for salvation, to ask for harsher punishment. At the end of the endless struggle, when the pain melted into boundless pleasure, her consciousness would blur into white—

「— Hah—!」

The moment she reached the fatal climax, the girl opened her eyes wide.

「—Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah—!」

She sat up on her bed abruptly. She was wide awake, but the fresh sensation of being touched lingered on her skin. Her breathing was as hot as magna, and she could trace the source to her abdomen.

「......! ...」

She was rubbing her thighs unconsciously. When she realized it, shame and self-loath struck her, making her shoulders quiver. She took a few minutes to compose herself, but the fiery lust in her body lingered. She muttered:

「...... How disgraceful......」

Imperial Guard Captain Lucanti Hargunska smiled firmly as she received the girl who dressed and exited her chambers alone.

「Good Morning, Your Majesty. Did you sleep well?」

She wasn't implying anything, but this was an awkward question for Chamille right now. The delusion she was trying to forget sprung onto her mind again, making her blush.

「... I'm fine. Walk with me, Lucanti, I want to start on today's work.
」

「Hmm? What about breakfast?」

The girl pretended to be calm as she strode forth, caught off guard by the questioning voice from behind. Chamille turned sharply, and the figure of the dark-haired youth appeared before her.

「—? S-Solork...?」

「You should eat your breakfast, today will probably be more exhausting than usual.」

Ikuta said with a gentle smile, dragging his left leg a little as he approached the Empress with his walking stick. A wave of anxiety made Chamille look up at the youth's face timidly.

「W-When did you get here—」

「Since late last night. I spent the night in the room you arranged for me in the palace. I'm still not used to such a big room though.」

Ikuta shrugged jestingly. He noticed the slight abnormality at this moment and touched the Empress' cheek.

「Your face is a bit red, Chamille. Is it a fever?」

「——!」

He nonchalantly leaned forth to touch his forehead to hers. The warmth from his touch made the girl's heart throbbed. After staying this way with the stiff Chamille for a moment, the youth backed away.

「Hmm～ doesn't seem like it. If you feel unwell, do sound it out. I will deal with the administrative works, your health is much more important.」

Ikuta declared seriously. Contrary to his concern, the girl's heart was beating wildly, bordering on heart arrhythmias. He was different from his time being silent in the harem. When she spoke with the youth before her, he would answer and even smile at her.

「Alright, I don't really want to, but I have to go. I have lots of work piled up at the base that I need to handle. I would love to ignore all that and spend the entire day here— but if I skip out on work too much, Brigadier General Sazarf will cry me a river.」

Ikuta took Chamille's hand and said with his eyes locked onto hers:

「So, don't feel lonely. I will be back in the evening, let's have dinner together.」

「... Erm, yes...」

With happiness, sadness and guilt swirling in her chest in equal parts, the girl could only squeeze out an answer. Ikuta stared into her wavering eyes, then added with a mischievous face.

「However— just for today, you might not have the time to feel lonely.」

「... Hmm, everyone's here, huh.」

After reluctantly bidding farewell to the youth, Chamille headed to the Governance Assembly with the mid level administrative officers, her first duty of the day.

When they saw her enter, the officials standing before their seats bowed silently. The Empress acknowledged their greetings with a nod after taking her seat.

「You may be seated.」

With the Empress' permission, the administrative officers finally sat down. This might seem like a tedious ceremonial procedure, but this has been greatly simplified compared to the past. Striking a balance between formalities and rationality had always been a great source of trouble for those seeking to revolutionize the system.

「Duty clerk, list the agenda for today.」

On her urging, an official stood up and spoke after taking a deep breath.

「Your Majesty. Due to a drop in wheat production, a few provinces in the southern territories experienced a huge spike in wheat prices. Because of the lack of rain, these areas experienced a poor harvest—」

When she heard the zones and numbers he listed, the Empress quietly shook her head.

「I understand the cause and effect leading to a lesser wheat in the market, but considering the production rate in past years, it's not serious enough to have such a great effect. This should be the time to open the stockpiles to makeup for the shortage, but the amount of wheat on the market is falling drastically— that means someone is hoarding the wheat.」

There was a flash of tension between the officials. No one could match the Empress in analyzing the reports to uncover the real issues.

「It is the norm for merchants to seek out profits from the trouble of others, but I won't permit anyone to create such troubles intentionally. Immediately warn those people to sell their stocks in the name of the—」

「I object～」

A lazy voice suddenly interrupted the scene that the Empress was controlling with her authority. The officials all look down the table in shock, finding a girl in a short white coat raising her hand, proposing a counteraction rising.

「... Interrupting me? You seemed more brave than your first attendance in this assembly might suggest, Third Grade Administrative Officer Vackie.」

「No, you got it backwards. I'm full of drive because this is my first time, Your Majesty.」

On Ikuta's recommendation, the apostle of Science who was appointed as an Administrative Officer, Mairitsuuinvuakkyen Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu, answered with a smile despite her Monarch's harsh tone.

「After all, we just want to force the greedy merchants to spit out the wheat they are hoarding, so there's no need for Your Majesty to wave your whip. There are tons of trivial matters like this, and there will be no end if you handled them one by one.」

「No— because such situations will occur in the future, setting a harsh example is important to deter any repeats.」

「Indeed. However, you have acted in similar ways repeatedly for the past two years, right? Whenever there is a rebellion, Your Majesty will personally crush it with your troops. I think that is good enough.」

「... Hmm?」

「Because of your efforts, there aren't many people in the Empire who dares to take you lightly. Hence, the issue of hoarding food stems from a more lowly reason. Which means— it is based on shallow expectations that something of this level won't be notice, and that the government will leave them be.」

The officials around her listened fearfully as the young girl spoke without any reservations. They thought about stopping her, but if the Empress was listening, then they couldn't do so. Vackie was unaware how much she was tormenting the stomachs of the Administrative Officers as she continued:

「No matter how hard Your Majesty works, you can't eliminate this completely. Because everyone assumes they would be fine. If you insist on handling it, it might be more effective to mete out punishment without further warning. It won't work if you add in a warning, since everyone will think it's still fine before they receive any warning.」

「... You have a point. But the wheat shortage is a real problem we can’t ignore. Do you have an alternative plan?」

「Instead of an alternative plan, I will suggest leaving it and encouraging them to resolve it on their own.」

The unexpected answer made Chamille stare with her eyes wide open. Vackie crossed her arms with a pout.

「This issue is probably a complaint from the citizens to the local army. In the Empire, problems are typically solved by the soldiers finding a compromise between the two parties, but it’s better to stop now. It will be different if the problem is too complex, but the sudden interjection of a third party is too strange, even if it’s Your Majesty.」

The officials were all dumbstruck. One of them stood up and interrupted anxiously.

「W-Wait! If we leave this be, the citizens will starve from the shortage in wheat! If the situation doesn’t improve, then they might attack the merchant’s shop!」

「Yes, that will probably happen. People will get frustrated when they’re anxious, and they will then take action. This is only natural for humans.」

「What—!」

The room was filled with an air of shock and speechlessness. But Vackie didn't back down because of that. With her hands on her hips, she continued at a leisurely pace:

「Let me ask you then, since ancient times, how do people act when they run into trouble? Ask the local soldiers to solve the problem? Wait for the Empress in Central to make her judgement? –None of that is correct. The simplest answer is, they will try to resolve it themselves.」

「E-Even so—」

「But that's...」

The girl didn't wait for any retort and said again.

「Speaking of which, the parties involved in this issue should be the provincial citizens and merchants. This has nothing to do with the soldiers, and the link to officials in the Central like us is even weaker. People unrelated to this interjecting will just complicate matters. Let's minimize the components of the problems and simplify the matter. That will make things clearer and also lighten the burden on Her Majesty, two birds with one stone.」

After hearing all that, Chamille crossed her arms and fell into deep thought.

「...In short, you want to draw the line between nation governance and provincial governance, right?」

「That’s right. The province will take care of it’s own affairs, and the Empress will only deal with matters only the Empress can resolve.」

Vackie said with her teeth bared. The Empress had a serious expression in stark contrast with her, and asked sharply:

「You mention the province should handle this, but who specifically will do it? We can’t order the local officials to persuade the merchants.」

「They should be busy collecting taxes on Your Majesty’s behalf, and the local governance is in the same situation as us, not directly involved with the issues. Those troubled by the wheat shortage should take action instead.」

「You are insisting that the provincial citizens have to take action?」

「Of course. Once they learn the wheat shortage is because of someone hoarding them, the provincial citizens can take some countermeasures too. The earlier mentioned ‘attacking the shop’ is one such method. It is very important for them to learn a lesson for being overly greedy in their conduct of business. If one side looks

down on the other, they won't be able to nurture a wholesome relationship.」

「... You are saying that it can't be helped if the order is disrupted? Your logic is too extreme. Before we can nurture the wholesome relationship you speak of, that province will fall into disorder.」

「Yes, that's right. So smashing up the shop is the final resort. Before the masses take to violence, we need to teach them what they should do— that's the best kind of support we can offer.」

Vackie said boldly and gestured with her hands as if she was a master baiter.

「Using an analogy, the government has been fishing to feed the citizens. We should teach them how to fish, and lend them fishing rods from now on. How's that, Your Majesty? That's what you want to achieve, right?」

「... Hmm.」

Chamille was at a loss for words when her thoughts were seen through unexpectedly. Her intelligence could be glimpsed through her unreasonable argument. She still couldn't decide how to evaluate the girl before her.

「Indeed, one of my goals is to raise the self governance ability of each province. However, I have no intention of using the wheat shortage to achieve this...」

「Yes, because Your Majesty is very gentle.」

All the officials stared with their eyes wide open. The Scientist girl said something they could never tell their monarch. She said it out easily as if it was a self-evident fact.

「However, I hope you can see this as a golden opportunity. This might sound heartless, but humans are more driven to take action when they are starving.」

Vackie raised the corners of her lips in a sly smile. The point she raised surprised Chamille— making use of the people's predicament to push for revolution, was in a sense similar to Chamille's wish to 'purify the nation through defeat in war'.

「... The citizens' reliance on the soldiers over the long years have led to the deterioration of provincial organizations like the labour union. If the provincial citizens are to stand up against the merchants, we have to inject new life into these organizations.」

「You should have already selected and nurtured the talents in these fields, correct? Your Majesty has taken the throne for more than two years, there's no way you will ignore such an obvious problem all this while.」

Vackie shrugged, showing her confidence in the Empress' capabilities. Chamille frowned in a mixture of perplexion and understanding.

「Giving those people a title and sending them out to fan the flames— no, to be consultants. As for their positions, hmm～ a zonal inspector or something will do. With their support, the provincial citizens can form a labour union, so the citizens can fight against the merchant's hoarding of provisions.」

「......」

「Since you already sent people over to assist, the citizens won't have any excuse to accuse the government of neglect. The military who ignored the citizens will suffer a hit to their reputation, which can't be helped. It will be a problem if it doesn't fall to an adequate level. The soldiers can't take care of the citizens every day. With the Igsem stepping down, the military keeping this act up will just create a hotbed for rebellion.」

The Empress very much agreed with her last line— Chamille could tell that Vackie might seem reckless and unreasonable on the surface, but actually have the same understanding of the Empire's various problems, and was even more farsighted than her in some ways. Chamille looked at the Scientist girl in a new light.

「... Very well. As you have said, I have prepared the talent to support their independent governance. I was planning to observe for a while more for the chance to despatch them out, but you made a convincing point that the problem of famine faced by the provincial citizens is a great opportunity.」

「Yes, as expected of Your Majesty— just do it with a relaxed mind. There is still time, so this will be a good case study whether this fails or succeeds.」

Vackie said as if this had nothing to do with her, and her irresponsible attitude irked the Empress. Chamille glared at her with a sterner gaze than before, and gave her a strict warning.

「... I will approve your proposal. But remember this, Scientist— governance isn't the place for you to experiment, every decision made here will impact the nation as a whole. Those who don't understand the gravity of our actions have no rights to participate in this meeting.」

The Empress said with anger in her voice, and the officials who felt the same way cast their gazes on the cocky new recruit. In this atmosphere that would make anyone flinch, the subject bowed leisurely despite the immense pressure.

「Duly noted, Your Majesty… It's a little stiff, but your serious attitude is your virtue. I will take your words to heart.」

By this time, Chamille couldn't help thinking that Vackie's fearless attitude resembled someone.

＊

「Good Morning— Hmm, everyone's here.」

On the other hand, a youth appeared in the Central Military base where high ranking officers were seated. This scene might seem out of place, but the rank insignia on her shoulders proved that this wasn't a joke.

The youngest Field Marshal in Empire history arrived, and the seated generals acknowledged him with their gaze.

「Hmm～ the atmosphere seems too reserved. This might be natural for a conference with General-grade officers, but you can relax more when I'm chairing the meeting.」

Ikuta walked to the head of the round table and sat down with a grumble. The military conference chaired by Solvenares Igsem in the past and Empress Chamille in recent times were suffocating to him.

「That might be difficult, Field Marshal Sir. Knowing who was occupying that seat recently, I can't help sitting up straight.」

The first to speak was Brigadier General Senpa Sazarf, who was the most intimate with the youth. Ikuta took the title of 「youngest

general」 from him, but with Sazarf's personality, he didn't feel vexed, and was happy instead. The youth smiled with a hint of loneliness.

「I hope you won't be too afraid of her… Sigh, but that will take time to change. Anyways, I will be handling Military Affairs for now, so the atmosphere has to change too. I have never liked the mood to be heavy.」

Ikuta announced as he cracked his neck. On the other hand, the generals appeared quiet on the surface, but some were speaking quietly a short distance from the youth.

「... Can I ask something, General Remeon?」

「What is it, General Shiba?」

「Do you feel nostalgic?」

When he pointed that out, the jade-eyed general overlapped the face of his late friend with the dark-haired youth and curled up the corners of his lips.

「So, let's discuss something we can smile about— the results of the Imperial Army internal investigation.」

Contrary to Ikuta's expectations, that opening line made the place more tense. General Remeon regained the authority of a veteran general and spoke.

「... The matter about suspecting a high ranking officer being a spy, correct?」

「Yes. However, from the results, it seems none of our high ranking officers are spies.」

The youth stated the conclusion preemptively. The surprised generals focused their gazes on him, and Ikuta continued plainly:

「Regarding this situation, we should treat it as part of Kioka's scheme to make us second guess whether there really are imposters among us. I judged that dragging the investigation on will be playing directly into Kioka's hands.」

This conclusion that sounded too hasty made the jade-eyed general speak once again:

「... There are three points of suspicion still bothering me. First, our secret reconnaissance turned up empty. Her Majesty who saw suspicious movements amongst the Aldera devotees is incredibly keen. So, why didn't we find anything with our reconnaissance?」

「I believe the reason lies in the choice of personnel. The unit tasked with the secret reconnaissance all lacked experience in such areas—isn't that right, Brigadier General Sazarf?」

Sazarf, who was named, stood up with a sigh. As if his presence was solely to be a scapegoat, he nodded with resignation.

「... I know very well that my performance was unsightly this time. Investigation is completely different from fighting on the frontlines, I did my best, but I have to admit that I fell short of the mark.」

He didn't intend to deflect responsibility, so he didn't put up any defences. Ikuta added in to help Sazarf.

「That might be so, but it would be wrong to blame Brigadier Sazarf for this. We lack the personnel to conduct this large scale investigation— that's the true reason for this failure. For Chamille who assigned this task to the Brigadier General, she had few options. Without any experts, she went for a trustworthy option instead… That should be the basis of her decision.」

「That means– the method of secret reconnaissance itself is the issue?」

「That's how I see it. As for Kioka, letting us detect the movements of the devotees is probably part of their scheme. Based on the terrain layout, they noted the places that the investigation teams would prioritize. The locals would then mislead the investigation teams to delay their probe into the crucial towns and villages.」

Hmmp… The jade-eyed general snorted. He didn't look convinced and continued pressing the suspicious points.

「And secondly… the unit that chased after the devotees into the mountains linked up with Her Majesty, and got pincered attacked on a hill. From what I know, the enemy's movements were too precise on every level. It will be more appropriate to assume someone leaked out the intel.」

「Is that really true? I think the biggest reason you feel that way was because of the timing the Kioka fourth fleet escapees reached the foot of the mountain, which coincided with the timing of Major Matthew's withdrawal from the frontlines after suffering a counterattack—

However, Kioka might get this timing from sources outside of a spy. The enemy commander Jean Arkinex grasped the predicament we are facing, and that's probably by contacting his allied unit. Considering his relative position with the fourth fleet, it might be possible to send a message on horseback or by pigeon. It's easier for them to execute, compared to the spy whose actions is restricted.」

「... What about the final point, the suspicion of Major Yuguni? If he isn't the spy, then someone is attempting to use him as a scapegoat— that's the conclusion I got from the report.」

General Remeon voiced his greatest concern. His tone was calm, but it had a seriousness that could shake off any substandard excuses.

Ikuta appeared calm, but felt cold sweat going down his back— he had to fool this man with his lies.

「That's also a part of Kioka's scheme— I suspect the Sprite in question sneaked into Major Yuguni's backpack on its own.」

「On its own?」

「That's right. During that night when we were defending the tableland, there were many Fire Sprites infiltrating our camp and attempting to burn our supplies… However, that wasn't all. Sneaking into the backpacks of Imperial soldiers, getting discovered at the right time, so the owner would get suspected of being a spy— I think a good amount of Sprites were trying to do so, and Major Yuguni fell victim to them. This is a scheme to sow discord in our camp.」

Ikuta said smoothly. He knew very well that mixing a lie into the truth is the best way to hide it.

「The situation is probably very simple. The Sprite hid in Major Yuguni's backpack to avoid detection by our search party, and got captured during its attempt to return to the Kioka camp— this might sound rather optimistic, but it's far more likely than suspecting that we have an imposter among us. Back then, I tightened our internal surveillance as a countermeasure against espionage. The small Sprite will be more suitable than humans in passing through the surveillance net.」

He knew this was shameless, but Ikuta still used his own capabilities as a shield. General Remeon fell into an awkward silence. He wasn't there, so it was hard for him to pursue the matter further. More importantly, the jade-eyed general was one of Ikuta's backers.

「By the way, are you ready for the punchline? There are anonymous whistleblowers who gave the names of the spies.」

「What?」　「Who?」

The generals were in an uproar. After piquing their interest, Ikuta slowly said a name.

「Well— first will be Ikuta Solork.」

As he expected, the conference room was engulfed in silence.

「...... Huh?」

「It's rumoured that he is seducing the Empress on Kioka's orders, a tumour trying to lead the Empire to its destruction. The proof is that his father is a war criminal, and his mother is from Kioka. Uwah～ What a suspicious guy～」

He said monotonously as he flipped through the documents in his hand.

「Another is Torway Remeon. He is rumoured to be colluding with Ikuta Solork in an attempt to overthrow the government. In order to regain his clan's former glory, Matthew Tetzirich is planning a military coup. Haroma Becker has been a Kioka agent before enlisting in the army, and is still carrying out missions for them, and so forth— sigh, this is terrible, there's spies everywhere in the Imperial Army.」

Ikuta tossed the papers aside after reading them, then planted his palms on the table and looked right at the generals.

「It should be clear to everyone, right? Just like their plans at the tableland, Kioka wants to destroy our relationships. It has been two years since Chamille built a new establishment under her reign, and the organization is stabilizing slowly. And this is also the time when noises like this are being made. Like accusing some guy of cronyism, or how they can't stand that guy getting to do the important work, and so forth… We only need to look to the past to learn that exploiting such gaps is Kioka's forte.」

The generals groaned with their arms crossed. They all agreed that this did match Kioka's style. Sensing that they were being convinced by his sophistry, Ikuta pressed the attack:

「That's the reason why I'm stopping the internal investigations. We have to make sure there is no use with all their gimmicks. Be it the cabinet or the army, we can't allow suspicion to spread within the organization. And I urge everyone to ignore such whistleblowing that is as good as graffiti, it's just a waste of time.」

Ikuta concluded, which made everyone hesitate on bringing this up again. No one objected to that. Because for the past few decades, they understood deeply the humiliation of being a real sucker getting played by Kioka.

「I already sent out an internal memo, but I will officially declare Major Yuguni is cleared of all espionage suspicion in the near future. I plan to revert him to his original duties, and I hope everyone will help me with that.」

Most of the generals nodded in concurment. Confirming that no one is harbouring strong suspicion, Ikuta sighed in secret and said.

「Any other opinions? ― Well then, that concludes this agenda. Onto the next topic.」

「Phew… One military conference in the afternoon, two lessons, one field exercise inspection, and a mountain of paperwork― I already knew that, but a Field Marshal sure is busy.」

The sound of his walking stick echoed through the corridor. After finishing the morning's work, Ikuta was heading to the Officer's Mess for a short break. He was forced to exercise strong self restraint even now. A moment of lapse, and he might head to the hammocks set up all over the base.

When he stepped into the mess, two familiar faces came to him as he expected.

「Good work, Ikuta-san. Want to have lunch together?」

「I will take you up on that. Being a Field Marshal sure is busy.」

「A Brigadier General is busy too, Sir. But I have an excellent adjutant who is a great help.」

Ikuta gratefully joined Haro and Sazarf who were dining together, then placed an order with the waiter who had walked over briskly. He then teased his former 'greatest superior' who was now his subordinate.

「It's decided then. I will make personnel changes and transfer Lieutenant Colonel Melza to my office.」

「Hey～ don't tell anyone, but I'm actually planning a military coup. If you really do that, I will really pull it off. The Holy Sazarf Imperial Army will rise up in revolt.」

The two of them jest with dangerous topics, sparks flying between their glares. The usual interaction made Ikuta relaxed, and he laid back onto his chair.

「But seriously, I want a capable adjutant to assist me with my daily duties. It will be best if I can leave it to Suya, but she is still studying in the academy.」

「I can recommend a subordinate to you, do you prefer young man or old guys?」

「I will prefer a charming older woman… That's what I want to say, but I need to prioritize capabilities first. I will endure even if he is a buff muscle man. If possible, I hope they don't have any strange quirks in their thinking and personality. Because I will be leaving a lot of miscellaneous matters to my adjutant.」

「That's just a normal outstanding talent. Things will be easier for me with someone like that under me, so it will be a waste if I transfer them to you, Sir.」

「Hahaha! Brigadier General Sazarf, you think you are being polite just by adding 'Sir' to your sentences?」

「Pardon me for my poor manners, this is the limit of how subservient I can be. Work hard on behalf of a crude plebeian like me, youngest Field Marshal in history Sir～」

「Are you sure it's fine to speak like that～ I have lots of work that I need the great hero of the northern unrest to handle~ You seem comfortable in your role as a general, I should promote you to Major General tomorrow～」

「Damn you! Try promoting me if you dare! I will take Lieutenant Colonel Melza in my arms and flee to the ends of the world!」

「Oh— Who are you taking in your arms when you flee, huh?」

A figure was standing behind Sazarf. That familiar voice made his face turn pale, and he turned around timidly.

「I came to take a look since the Brigadier General's lunch break seems rather long, so you are having a chat with the Field Marshal, huh? Leaving all the work piled on your desk behind and chatting away happily here. Pardon me for spoiling the mood, but what's going on here?」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza was standing there with a scary smile. Sazarf realized that she would rend any lies he attempted to use as cover, so he abandoned his unfinished lunch and sprung up from his chair like a wind up doll.

「I will go right now. Field Marshal Sir, I will be taking my leave.」

Sazarf said without any inflexion in his voice, and walked back to his office with Lieutenant Colonel Melza beside him. His back looked like that of a collared dog, which made Ikuta sighed deeply.

「... It would be troubling if I become like him. I have to choose my adjutant carefully...」

Ikuta muttered to himself, thinking that he might suffer the same fate tomorrow. He raised his head and looked at Haro who had stayed at the table.

「Sorry for the wait. You have something to tell me right, Haro?」

「... Well yes, but actually no...」

Even if she didn't say anything, the youth understood her intentions from the start. From the way Haro was hesitant to let others listen in, Ikuta could sense what she wanted to talk about.

「Oh, so it's 'she' who wants to talk, huh? —I get it, let's take a walk.」

The two of them left the mess and walked to an area that wasn't even used for field exercises anymore. When they were completely alone, Ikuta looked around him and said.

「—We have a clear view of the area here, so we don't have to worry about any eavesdropping. Come on out, Patrenshina.」

When he called her by that name, Haro's shoulders quivered and she looked down slightly. Tens of seconds later— the other 'her' with a completely different feel appeared.

「... I heard from stubbles how the morning's military conference went.」

「That saves me the trouble of repeating myself. So, what about it?」

The youth chatted enthusiastically with Patrenshina whom he hadn't seen for a while. She was puzzled by his unhesitant display of friendship, and got right into the main topic.

「... Your preemptive actions against the Kioka's scheme is impressive, and you mixed in the intel about us into your 'anonymous report', making it look unrealistic. If Kioka made the facts public in the future, no one will believe them...」

「Because this is the simplest option available to me, I used it to settle the other matters too. For example, your old home according to the records… Sorry, but I burned it down. You lost contact with

your ‘father’ and ‘mother’ for some time now, and fortunately, your ‘five younger brother’ don’t exist. It will be more of a hassle if they did.」

「That’s a setting used to stabilize Haro’s psyche, and isn’t set up for real, so it’s easy to fudge over it. My ‘father’ and ‘mother’ has probably reported back to Kioka. Agents who had been uncovered would just be a risk if they stayed in enemy territory.」

Patrenshina grunted and continued:

「In fact, it is unlikely that Kioka will make that fact public. Because that will be as good as saying they can’t control their own agents… So they will get revenge for this betrayal in secret. Poisoning my dinner, knifing my back in a crowd— it might happen tomorrow, five years later, or ten years later. But giving any rest to the traitor is the greatest retribution.」

Her tone was plain even when she talked about their eventual fate. Returning her gaze into the void back onto Ikuta, Patrenshina spoke a little more forcefully.

「Don’t misunderstand— Haro and I aren’t so weak to fear retribution. I’m curious about what you think, Ikuta Solork. Objectively speaking, permitting us to stay as comrades is an absurd decision.」

Her tone was filled with more awe than doubt. Until now, she still couldn’t get a handle on Ikuta Solork, who accepted a malicious character like her.

「That night, after you battled with me, you said many things to the Knights Corp members… but that is all sophistry, right?」

「……」

「Demanding them to place the blame on the distant past is foul play. I caused the death of many soldies, and should receive the appropriate punishment. There is a standard of merit and punishment in the army. And the fact is, many soldiers were punished based on that standard, such as Lieutenant General Safida.」

Ikuta didn't respond, and Patrenshina continued probing— to ascertain what the youth was actually thinking.

「However, you used a different standard to gauge my crimes, a clear show of double standard and a betrayal of the values that soldiers hold dear… You know that. The best evidence is that you didn't meet Senpa Sazarf's eyes even once during that earlier conversation.」

The youth grit his teeth in silence. Patrenshina changed the angle and pressed on:

「Let's talk about something more practical— how can you be sure a traitor won't betray you again? It might not happen today, but who knows what tomorrow might bring? No, maybe I'm preparing for my next betrayal right now… Do you want to fight all your enemies with a chill on your back?」

Patrenshina questioned the youth directly. She couldn't just ignore this. She couldn't entrust Haro's fate to him without completely understanding this man.

After a long silence, Ikuta slowly turned to the girl and said quietly.

「I trust you two— I think I have the right to say that.」

Patrenshina furrowed her brows unhappily. That reaction reminded him of her personality, and Ikuta added with a wry smile:

「Leaving Haro aside for now, it's not suitable for you to use trust as a basis for your decisions. It might sound unnecessary, but let me add this— you are a persona born to protect Haro from a harsh environment, correct?」

「... That's right.」

「Hence, you are more honest than anyone when it comes to protecting Haro. Dirtying your hands and committing crimes in her stead— you have been protecting Haro's heart all this time. No matter how many betrayals you commit, this is the only thing you won't compromise on.」

Ikuta looked right into her eyes as he said all that. Patrenshina couldn't help leaning back. This man with a twisted personality would occasionally show a forthright side, which makes her waver.

「Both of us want to protect the same thing. So you don't have any reason to betray me. Don't you think this is a very simple logic?」

This was the reasoning he prepared just for her. Ikuta glanced at Patrenshina who was considering if she should accept that, and cast his eyes down.

「Also— regarding the other points you raised, I have nothing to say. You are right.」

The youth said with a conflicted voice, and Patrenshina looked at him with surprise.

「Instead of prosecuting my comrade openly in the light, I would rather be guilty of the same crimes as my pals— that's the kind of person I have always been. Hence, I draw a clear line between the Knights Corp and others, and will do anything it takes to protect the people inside this boundary… Simply put, I already reached my conclusion from the start. I have never been troubled about forgiving

you two, I have only been thinking about how to protect the both of you.」

When he said that, Ikuta sighed with equal parts of self mockery and shame… What did he want to protect? What is he fighting? And what was he willing to sacrifice? He kept asking himself these questions on the battlefield, and he was reflecting on that right now.

「On the other hand, I'm the Field Marshal who has control over the discipline and order of the entire Imperial Military… what a mind boggling situation. Letting such a person become the leader of the army, and revered as a hero too, this is a historical mistake. One day, the entire nation will understand that.」

Ikuta said quietly with an intense voice, and turned quiet for a moment. He spent a few seconds composing himself before raising his head with a calm expression.

「I've digressed, let's get back on topic… I mean it when I say I feel guilty about not facing you properly in the past, it's the same for Matthew and Torway. I'm also aware that using that point to forgive you is sophistry. Because we are the only ones who will accept that logic. Anyone else who hears it will just get enraged.」

「......」

「But I had to say it back then. If I use the external standard… and judge using the correct standard for rewards and punishment, then Matthew and Torway can never forgive you. No matter how much they wanted to, their deep values as soldiers would get in the way of their thinking… So I gave them a chance with my sophistry, making up a line of reasoning for them to pardon you. No matter how absurd, it was, I knew that was what they wanted the most.」

Everything he said were like the bubbles breathed out of someone drowning. Ikuta’s breathing seemed pained as he soldiered on.

「Yatori’s struggle must be more intense than theirs. If it was the old her, she would suppress her own emotions and send you for court martial. Just like how she followed her orders to subjugate me.

However— she is different now. She has merged into me, and her conclusion is...」

When he conveyed the will of Yatorishino Igsem within him, his voice would stop trembling and his tone would be firm.

「The Knights Corp is Chamille’s cradle, and we need everyone. This is absolutely necessary— when she is still a child.」

After he said that, Ikuta grabbed her shoulders and told her in a posture close to a hug:

「Haro, Patrenshina… We can accept you as our comrades, but we can’t ever absolve you in the truest sense. Because your sins is also our sins. For the soldiers who got hurt or died because of your actions, only their families who survived them have the right to judge us.」

「......!...」

「Hence, I can never puff my chest out proudly before the person I respect the most.」

Ikuta thought back— the people he had to deceive to enforce his sophistry, and the weight of the debts pressing on his shoulders. Especially the death of the soldiers under their command, the one who felt the most guilty would be the highest ranking officer on scene.

「... Brigadier General Sazarf… I can't even ask for your forgiveness... 」

The youth said the name of the person he never wanted to deceive. A few clear droplets stained the woman's sleeve.

＊

「Your Majesty, lunch is here.」

「Enter.」

Inside her office, Chamille was facing a mountain of documents with a stamp in hand. When she heard the report of Imperial Guard Captain Lucanti who was guarding the door, she responded without taking her eyes off the papers.

「Sorry for the intrusion… Your Majesty… is this enough for today too?」

A maid pushed a meal cart in, and asked as she served the plates onto the table. Chamille glanced at her and answered coldly.

「... It's fine. Two cornbread, stir fried meat and vegetable, an appropriate portion of yogurt and fruits, it's all as I ordered.」

「...I-Is that so? I will take my leave then...」

The maid bowed after serving the meal, then left the office quietly. Chamille decided to eat after finishing a pile of documents and kept working. However, the voice of the Imperial Guard Captain came again.

「Your Majesty, my apologies for disturbing you, but a guest wish to meet you.」

「Meet me? Who?」

「It’s Vackie-san, she informed that her goal is to 『Have lunch together!』」

When she heard that, Chamille’s stamping went way off. Her hands finally stopped, turning her mind from her work to the guest.

「... It’s a pain, but I can’t ignore the person recommended by Solork… Let her in.」

「Yes, my liege.」

Lucanti immediately passed the instruction, and the footsteps of the attendant running to relay the message grew distant. A few minutes later, Chamille sensed a visitor approaching, and her door was abruptly opened.

「Jang jang jang~ your lunch mate is here! Is there any pitiful child eating unappetizing food here～!?」

Vackie said loudly right off the spot. Her appearance that far exceeded Chamille’s expectations made the Empress nurse her temple and groan.

「... Luckily, I haven’t touched my food yet, or I might have choked from the shock.」

「Oh, surely you jest! But that’s great, I bought lunch here too, so let’s eat together! Is this seat taken?」

Vackie found a rattan chair that was some distance away from the table, and pulled it to Chamille’s desk. She then laid out her lunch on the table, which made the Empress furrowed her brows.

「... I don’t recall summoning you to dine with me, or permitting you to sit. It might be too late to ask this, but shouldn’t you learn the minimal etiquettes when meeting the Empress?」

「Yes, Yorga taught me, but I ignored it all. I have always hated rules and protocols. Chamille, are you good with all that?」

「There’s no proficiency in protocols, it’s something as natural as breathing for a member of the imperial family… by the way, if I’m not mistaken, did you just omit the honorifics and addressed me directly by my name?」

「Yes, I called you Chamille. Ikuta-nii told me not to address you as Your Majesty in private.」

Chamille was at a loss for words. She was powerless to refute Vackie's name dropping Ikuta. After glaring at Vackie’s leisurely smile for a while, she sighed:

「... I still haven’t grasped your intentions yet, but since this is what Solork wants, I will accept it. Only in private without any outsiders, I will permit you to address me directly by my name. Although I don’t like it.」

「You dislike people calling you by your name?」

「It depends— most people won’t like being called by a stranger with a cheeky smile.」

「Yes～ you have a point.」

Vackie crossed her arms in deep thought, then said again in less than five seconds:

「But, I think Chamille is very kind, for example, the food over here.
」

「...? What's wrong with my lunch?」

「Well, it's incredibly plain. Even the lunch of a low ranking administrative officer is more luxurious than this. There are few dishes, and even that bread isn't made from flour, right?」

The girl pointed that out as she looked at the meal on the table. Chamille snorted.

「I was wondering what you want to say… The recent military campaigns dealt intense pressure on the budget, so there aren't excess money to spent on lavish meals. This bread is made from corn— I'm expecting it to become a main crop in the future. I'm confirming how the processed corn taste personally.」

Chamille felt there wasn't time to deal with her documents, and reached for her lunch. She tore off a small piece of cornbread, toss it in her mouth and chewed.

「... Hmm. It's not as good as bread made from flour, but the texture has improved greatly compared to the prototype. With this standard, it's possible for it to become a staple food...」

Chamille analyzed the taste of the bread, and suddenly noticed a passionate gaze on her. Chamille felt a little disgusted by the Scientist girl looking at her with sparkling eyes and asked:

「...... Why are you staring at me like that, Third Grade Administrative Officer Vackie?」

「Chamille-chan is super cool～」

That came out of the blue. When she heard that sudden compliment, Chamille wasn't sure if it was sincere, and looked at her puzzledly.

「Super… Super cool?」

「Yes, you are super cool. You took the throne at such a young age, and whenever a rebellion broke out—— you will suppress it personally. You are worried about the citizens even when you eat. For a super girl like that, there's no other way to describe you other than super cool.」

At this point, the Empress finally grasped the core of her message, and felt self mockery and frustration rise in her heart. Chamille had a self mocking smile on her face as she looked at the Scientist girl.

「... Your judgement is in error.」

「Hmm?」

「A truely great ruler will not let a rebellion occur in the first place. A real kind monarch who cares about the people won't let them starve. I'm not a good ruler, that's why the nation is in chaos and the people are famished. These are the signs of an incompetent ruler.」

It was all the result of her poor leadership. For the Empress, saying that the responsibility lies with her was an obvious truth. However, Vackie tilted her head quizzingly and retorted:

「That's a very unscienctific way of thinking. This is just the timing of your coronation which led to you shouldering the consequences of the previous ruler's poor governance. The starting point might be bad, but it won't affect your evaluation as an individual, right?」

You did your best in a terrible situation. This was an obvious fact to the Scientist girl. Chamille put down the bread and asked:

「Starting point? —When do you mean?」

「Around two years ago, the moment of your coronation, right?」

When she heard this answer, Chamille understood the difference in understanding between the two of them. The Empress grunted, then said with the emotions of teaching a toddler a cruel fact.

「My starting point is more than 900 years ago.」

「—Huh?」

Even Vackie couldn’t help frowning. Chamille continued speaking nonchalantly to the baffled Vackie.

「The Imperial family is hereditary, and the Empress will take on all the accomplishments of the previous monarchs on their coronation. Hence— I’m no longer an individual. As long as this rotten and twisted tree still stands, then I’m just a branch on it named Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

The girl said with great conviction… The wealth and sins she inherited through the eras. From the day she was born as a member of the Imperial family, she had been told that was what she was.

「The sins lies in my bloodline. So I’m a tyrant and incompetent ruler since birth… That goes without saying too. Since you will be staying in this palace, you will understand this fact with time.」

As if the conversation was over, the Empress started eating again. Vackie remained still for a moment, carefully disgusting these words. She then asked with a slightly trembling voice:

「... Are you serious about all that?」

「Don’t get so full of yourself. I have no interest in making fun of a plebian like you.」

Chamille intimidated her with a stern face, and Vackie finally hung her head in silence. So she had finally learned fear? Empress relaxed with that in mind— However...

「... You...」

「?」

「Are you retarded———————————————————————————————————————!」

The next moment, the girl in a voice so loud, it was hard to imagine it came from her petite body. It went through her eardrum and impacted her brain, turning Chamille stiff, the bread falling from her hand.

「— W-What...」

「You said that! That, that! That that kind of stupid statement, so of course I will call you a retard! What the hell with that theory you made up just to bully yourself!? Twisted, childish and convoluted, like some avant garde abstract art piece made by an artist who smoked weed! Right or wrong aside, what good will this theory do for anyone? Hey, who will it benefit~?」

Not satisfied with just shouting, Vackie leaned over the table right into the Empress' face and scolded her from point blank:

「Listen up, Shamy! The palace and Imperial family is just a part of the whole world! Not just that, the entire Katjvarna Empire is just a corner of the wide world! What I'm saying is, aside from the narrow values constraining you, there are as many ways of thoughts as there are stars in the sky! You are so smart, so don't get stuck in a deadend, damn it～!」

The girl ruffled her hair as if she was losing patience. Chamille stared blankly as the girl went wild, and couldn't even understand a tenth of what she was saying. But Vackie wasn't fazed and continued:

「So I will say this as many times as it takes, Chamille-chan is super cool! It doesn't matter what you think~ This is an absolute fact protected by the holy realm of 'subjectivity, so you can't refute it! If you can't stand it, then act like a bad girl that will make me sick! You can't do it anyway, since you are a good girl! Hmmp～!」

Vackie stuck her tongue out at the Empress. Her taunting actions made Chamille fumed for unknown reasons. She clenched her fist on the table:

「... There's a limit to my patience, Third Grade Administrative Officer Vackie. Shut up and get out of my sight! Or else—」

「Or else what? You will draw your sword? Or summon your bodyguard? Uwah~ so lame~ gutless~ is the natural born tyrant and despot Empress Chamille a coward who can't even quarrel with another girl of her age～?」

「……!」

「Oh, what I just said angered you for real. Wonderful~ just wonderful~ how can we quarrel if you act all calm and mature? I'm taunting you and refuting the values you think so highly of. There's nothing more infuriating than that, right? There's no way you can stay quiet after that!」

Creak! Something in Chamille's heart snapped. She couldn't understand what made her angry, and responded to the taunt on reflex.

「— Alright then, Scientist, sit down! Just lopping your head off won't appease me! Watch me humiliate you with my words, and make you regret your rash actions!」

「Oh my～big words right from the start! I will take you on with my full power! Oh, really now~ Chamille-chan is super cool!」

Vackie retorted, and the two of them argued intensely with the table between them. Lucanti who charged in when she heard the first shout could only stand there as she watched the two of them hurl insults at each other.

To anyone watching, this was just a squabble between kids— and that's why there was no way for outsiders to butt in.



That evening, Ikuta finished his work on base and returned to the palace. Walking briskly in the passageway leading to the Empress' chambers.

「Phew… I made it back before dusk. Looks like I made it in time for dinner.」

The youth looked out at the orange sky outside the window and said with a smile. Spending as much time with Chamille as possible was a goal that he prioritized more than his duty as a Field Marshal.

「Good evening, Field Marshal Sir.」

After passing right through the martial officers guarding the junction within the restricted zone, Ikuta greeted the Imperial Guard Captain that has become a close acquaintance.

「Good evening, Captain Lucanti, thank you for your hard work. Take me to her room.」

She nodded and walked alongside Ikuta. But when they almost reached the Empress' chambers, lucanti quietly told the youth:

「— Lord Solork, pardon my insolence, but a word of advice.」

「Hmm?」

「Please brace yourself, Her Majesty is incredibly displeased right now.」

Ikuta was shocked when he received such advice for the first time. Chamille wasn't a girl who showed her displeasure on her face. If she was showing it, then her mood must be extremely bad.

「Your Majesty, Lord Solork has returned.」

「...... Let him in.」

His speculation was confirmed by her depressed voice behind the door. Finished with her duty as a guide, Lucanti wished him good luck and returned to her post. Ikuta who stood alone before the door had a strong ominous feeling as he quietly opened the door and entered.

「... Chamille, I'm back. I'm a little late, did you eat dinner—」

The moment the youth entered, the girl approached him with large steps. Ikuta stopped, and she walked right up to him and took a deep breath.

「What's the hell is with that woman ————————————————————————!」

Chamille shouted at the top of her lungs at the youth she had been waiting for anxiously. Ikuta who was expecting this a little felt a little disorientated by that shout, but still chose his words carefully.

「... Are you referring to Malvackie?」

「Who else can it be? I feel silly just counting the number of reckless actions she made today! She has no regard for ceremony, is clueless about saying the wrong things, and is shameless when she speaks! If you aren't the one who recommended her, I would have fired her a hundred times already!」

「Well, I know what you mean. I can imagine the gists of the interaction between you two. You are right to be angry. So don’t hold back, vent it out on me for the historical mistake of introducing such a dangerous thing into civil service.」

「I’m not blaming you, I just want to lash out at that woman so much! That Mairitsuuinvuakkyen Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu! What kind of environment and education is needed to nurture such a personality? Compared to her, the characters in a comedy theatre are more civilized and sensible!」

「You actually said her full name without biting your tongue...」

「She refuted me publicly in a meeting with no regards for my other vassals! If it’s just that, I will think of her as being bold, but she runs up to me whenever she wants and says whatever is on her mind! Can you imagine how troubled I am when she barged into my office without an appointment with a lunchbox in hand? If you go by the proper procedures, she will need to wait for a few months before dining with the Empress, but that woman did it as if she was eating lunch with a classmate!」

「Hmm… Because she is stupid...」

「After acting so impudently, she dare call me Chamille with a cheeky face! Because she has permission from you, she didn’t care

no matter how hard I tried to draw the line between master and vassal! It's useless to treat her coldly, and she will even taunt me directly! S-She called me a coward who can't even quarrel with her! 」

The girl hung her head with her shoulders trembling. It was the first time Ikuta saw Chamille reacting like this.

「Taking a step back— No, taking ten thousand steps back! I can pretend to be a magnanimous ruler and ignore all that as trivialities! But— the most aggravating thing is!」

「Mmhmm...」

「I keep overlapping her demeanour with yours! You when we just met! This frustrates, aggravates and is more unforgivable than anything else— I-I—!」

Her emotional outburst was beyond words, and the girl couldn't say anything more. At that moment, Ikuta spread his arms and held Chamille tight.

「... Both of us got to know each other when our personalities were edgy and sharp, so that girl's personality got influenced by me in

both a negative and positive way. Sorry, Chamille. Her carefree nature must have made you so angry.」

「...... Ughh——...!」

The girl in his arms couldn't control her feelings and pounded on the youth's chest. Ikuta accepted those cute punches and whispered into her ears:

「Vent all the frustrations of your quarrels with her all on me. You can shout all you want, hit, scratch or pinch me too. Don't worry, I will be here until you have vented it all out.」

If the girl wanted to vent, the youth would accept it all. The person in his arms wasn't the Empress, but the child Chamille.

In the end, she used up all her stamina at 10 pm.

「... She's so tired from her anger that she fell asleep?」

The girl laid on the bed, snoring away with her head on his lap. As he watched the innocent face that befitted her age, Ikuta gently brushed her hair.

「... In the few hours since noon, her anger directed outside herself and the Imperial house filled her mind. Even this girl with extraordinary self control can't handle this fury, and she had to vent it out on me.」

This fact moved Ikuta, and he muttered.

「Well done, Vackie— This is exactly why I invited you here.」

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「I'm back～」

At the same time, in the bureaucrat dormitory in a corner of the palace. Vackie barged into Third Grade Administrative Officer Yorga Daimudaritsu's room on the first floor. Yorga who was sitting before his desk and working on his budget cutting proposal frowned.

「... No, what do you mean that you are back? This isn't your room. Isn't it weird for you to take off your coat and sit on the bed?」

「Ehh～ it's fine to let me stay here~ I spent a lot of energy today, so it's a pain to walk back to my room~ Let me sleep here～」

The girl said and laid face down heavily onto the bed. Yorga left his seat frantically.

「If you hog the only bed, then where do I sleep? Get up! If you don't, I will carry you to your room!」

「That sounds easy, so it's all good~ I'm counting on you～」

Vackie decided to not even move a finger, letting her old Scientist friend have his way with her. Yorga was about to carry her with a face of resignation when he noticed something amiss and opened his eyes wide.

「...? What's wrong with your cheek?」

He pointed at Vackie's face and asked. More specifically, he was pointing at the bright red palm shaped mark on her cheek.

She giggled at that question, and announced proudly:

「Can't you tell? — This is the greatest achievement of my day.」

Chapter 2: Each Individual's Situation

The sound of shells hitting the ground came from one km away. As he watched the thick smoke from the aftermath of the shelling, the slightly pudgy youth sighed in awe.

「... Woah...」

Besides him, the dark-haired youth and jade-eyed youth were watching the same scene. After observing the shelling, Ikuta put down his telescope and nodded slightly.

「... Hmm, the landing point is within the margin of error. It took a lot of effort, but we have finally reached the stage of deploying this for practical use.」

Ikuta placed his hand on the item before him— a lump of metal pointing diagonally towards the sky, and said:

「Well then, I will explain this again. This is a Blast Cannon, it uses the 『Dynamic Air』 created by Fire Sprites to launch a powerful suppressive weapon. We are still lagging far behind Kioka, but with the change in policy with Chamille's coronation, we cut off ties with the Aldera Holy Nation, so the Empire can finally craft these weapons.」

The creation of the Blast Cannons proceeded despite the civil unrest, but it was still a milestone for their military. Ikuta skipped over the problems of crafting them, and moved on to their practical application:

「By the way, this Blast Cannon is on the small side. This is a copy of the Blast Cannons we captured from the ships during the Port Nemong naval battle, so it's size is designed for usage on ships. Kioka probably has the capability to create larger Blast Cannons. Compared to their largest model, this Blast Cannon will pale in comparison.」

「This Blast Cannon can't even compare… Just how strong is it? I can't even imagine.」

「Hmm～ Let's see… Can you imagine if just one shot can destroy the buildings over there?」

Ikuta said something terrifying nonchalantly. Matthew felt a chill down his back and his shoulders shivered.

「Regrettably, we are limited by technical problems and can't make such a large model. But there's no need to despair, since this size is the most suited for use on the battlefield.」

Ikuta said optimistically. Larger Blast Cannons were either fixed defences or transported to the battlefield in pieces to be assembled there. Those big Blast Cannons were definitely powerful, but getting used to the most common sized weapon was the correct procedure.

「First, I want you two to familiarize yourself with its capabilities.」

「This will be the new weapon that will become the king of the battlefield, huh. It's fundamentally different from Wind Cannons, right?」

「You can think of them as different things. The Blast Cannon uses Dynamic Air, so there are more things you need to be careful of. Preparations, inspections and operations— every step will have to be done with the utmost caution. A new artillery unit needs to be form around troops with Fire Sprite partners.」

I'm working on that right now,
Ikuta added. The pudgy youth turned to him as if he just remembered something.

「... I almost forgot, you are the Field Marshal… Let me use this chance to ask, what's it like looking down at the military from the top? Is the view suddenly different..?」

「In a word, it's very troublesome. The only saving grace is that I have the authority to make adjustments to make things more convenient for me.」

His uninspiring comment made Matthew slump his shoulders. Torway patted his back to cheer him up.

「Back on topic— We talked about how to operate the Blast Cannon, but that's actually the job of the artillery unit, the commander just needs to grasp the basics. As for that, I will hold a lecture on artillery designed for officers, so make sure to attend it.」

「Unlike you, we won't skip out on work… Alright then, what exactly do you want us to do? You must have a goal since you got us here ahead of time.」

Ikuta nodded and turned to them again and informed them formally.

「Matthew, Torway— currently, your battalions are the most advanced unit in the Empire. Especially the tactics in small units operating separately, no other unit even comes close. This means that the other unit will be using you as reference to gradually improve their troop training and deployment.」

「Oh, now that you mention it, I feel a heavy load on my shoulders...」

「... I understand how heavy my responsibility is. So we will become the models in the future— Uwah?」

Torway was saying he had braced himself mentally with a serious face, when Ikuta flicked his forehead. The dark-haired youth grunted then looked at the teary eyed Torway nursing his forehead.

「Don't make your own conclusion, pretty boy. No one is asking you to take responsibility. What I'm saying is the opposite. If you keep showing a frown on your face, no one will follow you.」

「Huh?」

「Like～I～said, don't increase the barrier to entry. You possess the most advanced technique, but if you keep giving off a tense air, you will scare away those who want to learn from you, right? Or are you trying to hog the sniping and small independent unit tactics, and keep it as a Remeon exclusive?」

「No— Not at all! I want to impart my skills to as many soldiers as possible...!」

「Then hold on that thought, adopt the appropriate attitude and work hard in spreading this tactic… I said this a long time ago, and will repeat again. A relaxed war is the right way to fight a war. If you are the only one sloughing hard, then we are still far from reaching this goal.」

When he heard that, Torway suddenly realized it. He finally learned that he had caved under the heavy responsibility of the developer of

the next generation of tactics, and fell on his bad habits of constrained vision.

「For now, it's enough for you to relax your brows. Don't forget even if I'm not around. If I see you revert back to your old ways, I will flick your forehead as many times as it takes.」

Ikuta said as he exert strength on the thumb and middle finger of his left hand. After seeing the jade-eyed youth nodding profusely, he retracted his hand and turned:

「Alright then— I'm returning to the palace.」

「Huh? What are you saying, it's just 1pm?」

「I know, but I want to keep Chamille company today no matter what. I will leave the rest to you, I'm off then!」

With that, Ikuta left them behind and strode off. Matthew watched dumbfoundedly as he left swiftly with a speed unimaginable for someone who needed a walking stick.

「... That guy is overprotective of Her Majesty.」

「That's how much he cherishes her. I think that's a great thing.」

Torway smiled after saying that. Matthew shrugged and muttered 「That's true～」

At the same time— a tall woman was observing the interaction between the three men.

「... Hey, Patrenshina.」

As she watched her comrades from afar, Haro called the other persona within her. An echo like response came soon after.

—Haro. You have been talking to me a lot recently, you should refrain from doing so.

「......」

— Your consciousness and mine shouldn't exist in parallel. You are awake when I'm asleep, and you are up and about while I slumber. And the reason for that— we don't have to say any more, right?

This question made Haro bit her lips hard, and she replied:

「... It's to protect my heart. To separate me from the crimes you committed, so I can remain unaware… correct?」

— That's right. However, the rules changed after Ikuta Solork got us. The lines are blurred. Your comrades have accepted you wholeheartedly, and you have a safe haven in the truest sense… That's why you are directly facing the crimes I have commited all this while.

She warned her of the grave dangers. Haro gasped. Since this came from Patrenshina, she couldn't take this lightly.

— Everything is done by Patrenshina (me). Are you really going to abandon the system that has protected Haro's heart all this while? I'm not angry, just scared— afraid that you will crumble from the guilt. The blood staining my hands is enough to destroy you.

Haro clenched her fists when she heard that… Her worries were probably valid. But despite that, Haro wouldn't hesitate for that reason.

「... It's fine. I can't spare the time to crumble.」

Haro said with steel like determination. She was permitted to stay as a member of the 「Knights Corp」, and her comrades would shoulder her sins with her. How should she deal with this fact, and how she should live on— from the moment she failed as a spy, she had been thinking about that.

「So, just the current me isn't enough.」

—*......Haro.*

「With your power, I can accomplish more things, correct?」

—*Haro!*

Sensing the conclusion she was reaching, Patrenshina cut her off firmly. She continued like an elder sister advising her obstinate younger sister:

— *Calm down, that's no good. If you consciously use my power, you won't have any excuse, and there won't be any more boundaries. You will step over the line for Haro to continue being a good girl.*

「... That's...!」

— *To be frank, I have the fetish of torturing people for fun too. And I have the twisted mentality of finding joy in betraying others. When the line separating you and me disappears, you will become a gleeful murderer too— no matter how you face these crimes in the future, you can't change the past.*

「......!」

—All my skills are of this variety; conning, interrogation, torturing techniques— none of it will yield a bright result after usage. Although every skill can shine if used properly, there are techniques that will affect your psyche adversely just from using them. Do you think the people you loved will want you, who wish to be a good girl, be grinded down in such a way?

Haro couldn't refute her, and fell silent with gritted teeth. She felt helplessness, anxiety, guilt, and the strongest of all, her feelings towards her comrades— Patrenshina tried her best to calmly persuade Haro who was getting unstable because she was tormented by all that.

—Haro, don't be rash. If you are in danger, I will come out and deal with it. From now on, I will include the members of the Knights Corp as priority protection targets. Our personas are walking on a tightrope right now, we might slip if we got careless, which will lead to a direct breakdown.

She was born to protect Haro's heart, and offered sincere advice. Haro knew she should listen, but the things she followed blindly in the past flashed across her mind, which frustrates Haro to no ends.

「... I...!」

At the same time. In a corner of the palace, an encounter nobody expected was about to play out.

Imperial Guard Captain Lucanti Hargunska's duties were mainly protecting the Empress and the security within the palace. When her subordinates were guarding Chamille, she would patrol the palace or guide the guards. Right now, she was in the midst of her patrols.

When she walked into a corridor, a voice came from an unexpected angle.

「... Good Afternoon.」

「Hmm?」

The female knight backed away with her hand on her hilt. She could see a girl— Third Grade Administrative Officer Vackie was hanging from the ceiling like a bat.

「It's impossible for humans to stand on the ceiling! Third Grade Administrative Officer Vackie, so you are a demon!」

「Hahaha! I'm glad to see you so surprised, but I'm not such an unscientific existence～!」

Vackie's feet left the ceiling and she flipped midair before landing— or that was her plan. However, her execution failed at the very first step. She couldn't move her feet.

「... Hmm? M-My hand can't reach the secured part… M-My abdomen muscles are...!」

The device she used to stand on the ceiling backfired on her, and the girl couldn't move. Lucanti watched this queer scene stiffly, then heard a cry from above.

「... I-I can't get down～ Lulu, save me～」

「— So you just glued your soles onto the ceiling?」

After getting a stepping board from a nearby room to help Vackie get down, Lucanti alternated her gaze between Vackie and the contraption on the ceiling with disappointment on her face.

「How regrettable. In many tales of chivalry, inhuman creatures with no morals are often featured. I thought I finally met one, and got so excited.」

「Oh～ this is embarrassing. If you didn't pass by, it will be terrible if all the blood rushes into my brain.」

Vackie scratched her head bashfully. She suddenly reached into her white coat and took out a large number of snacks pinched between her fingers.

「So, take this as thanks! Don't hold back, eat up!」

「My deepest thanks. An act of chivalry ask for no rewards though, but I appreciate the sentiment.」

「Then don't think of it as a gift, and just join me for a snack?」

「I would like to, but I can't snack while on duty.」

Lucanti forcefully averted her gaze and rejected the temptation. Vackie tossed a snack into her mouth with a face of pity, and was about to say something when—

「— What are you two doing along the palace's passageway?」

They turned towards the slimy voice, and Lucanti saluted.

「Lord Fox. This humble officer has just received an invitation to snack with Lady Vackie.」

「That retarded answer makes my head hurts. I have told you not to desecrate this holy place with such uncouth behaviour.」

The man said with contempt. The treacherous minister Trisnai Izanma wore a khaki attire of the highest ranking bureaucrat and stood before them. Vackie could guess who he was without asking, and looked at him curiously.

「—I see, so you are the rumoured Trisnai Izanma. You do have a unique style about you.」

「Don't address someone you just met by their name without honorifics. Who are you?」

「Mairitsuuinvuakkyen Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu. A young woman who was appointed as a Third Grade Administrative Officer last month. I'm still immature, and look forward to your guidance in the future, Chancellor .」

Vackie showed an innocent smile that contrasted with his smile and greeted him. Trisnai wasn't expecting this lack of hostility, and took a few seconds to find the words to say.

「—Uwah～ What's going on here?」

Right then, another person joined in the conversation. Coincidentally— Or rather, unluckily, Ikuta Solork came across them in the corridor.

「Hi～Ikuta-nii! You got off work early today, how shameless! Oh, want some snacks?」

Vackie took out snacks from her white coat again. Ikuta took one piece that was shoved right before his eyes and tossed it into his mouth, and then locked gaze with his enemy.

「...Ikuta Sankrei. I just heard something absurd from this person here.」

「If you are talking about this girl getting appointed as an administrative officer, that’s true. I’m the one who arranged it.」

「Yay～ I got a backer! It’s great that he can hire whoever he wants! 」

The subject herself said with both hands raised. Trisnai glanced at her, then asked seriously.

「...... Are you of sound mind?」

「........... I’m completely sane.」

Ikuta paused for some time before answering. The fox snorted and then shrug:

「Her Majesty regards you highly, I won’t demand you to stay completely out of the recruitment of personnel. However, this is not a circus or nursery. I expect the Field Marshal of the Empire to know at least this much...」

Ikuta bitterly endured his criticism and look of contempt, and squeezed out a reply with a solemn face.

「... I invite her here because I think she will be of use. Save your evaluation for the future.」

Ikuta understood this appointment was reckless, so he didn’t say anything else. Trisnai shifted his reptile-like gaze from the youth to Vackie.

「...Mairitsuuinvuakkyen Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu Third Grade Admin Officer.」

The man said the girl’s name fluently with impeccable pronunciation. This made Vackie stared with her eyes wide, and turned obediently towards him.

「— What is it?」

「Are you a monkey? Or a human?」

His question was incredibly rude. However, Vackie liked the way he didn’t mince his words, and answered with her chest puffed out:

「Good question. There is only one answer— humans are monkeys that have learned to think!」

To her, this was the funniest answer, but the man ignored her. Trisnai looked at the snack crumbs on her mouth with a face of contempt, and reminded her.

「Eating along the corridors is prohibited everywhere in the palace, the same goes for idle chatter. If you claim to be a human and not a monkey, then follow these rules.」

With that, Trisnai turned and left. While walking away, he added:

「I will let this slide this time. However, I have no interest in rearing monkeys. Remember, if your behaviour is unsightly, you will lose your head.」

Trisnai warned sternly and left the three of them behind. The atmosphere was still heavy, but the Scientist girl said with a whistle:

「... Oooh～how showy～ that’s a worthy opponent, Ikuta-nii.」

「......」

「...Ikuta-nii? Ah! That hurts!」

The moment Ikuta stood before Vackie, his two index fingers were pressed onto her temples in a drilling motion. He kept drilling as he said to his junior disciple with pent up emotions.

「... Hey～Vackie. That fox suspected me of possessing common sense, an unprecedented experience for me. Do you know how I feel about that? How many words do you need to describe it?」

「That hurts...! ...Ten, ten words!」

「Good, say it.」

「I'm going to find me a hole to hide in!」

Kyaa～! After a short pause, the girl's scream echoed throughout the palace. Whether her answer was right or wrong, the results would have probably been the same.

After running into that unexpected situation when he returned to the palace, Ikuta went to the Empress' office, who should be done with her morning's audience.

「—Solork?」

When she saw him, Chamille got up frantically. He was a Field Marshal, and shouldn't be back at this hour. From the sweat on his brows, he had clearly forced his schedule open to come here.

「Phew— my schedule for the morning is tight, luckily, I made it in time.」

Ikuta said with a smile and approached the girl nonchalantly. Chamille stopped the youth with her words, then walked over to support his shoulder.

「I told you not to push yourself...! Things are different now, you have an old wound on your leg. The meeting today is meant for admin officers, so you don't have to go out of your way to attend... 」

「That won't do. The fox will be here today.」

The youth answered without hesitation. He combed the girl's blonde hair gently and continued:

「I saw him just now. I want to forget that as soon as possible, so I won't mention the details. But he is the same as always.」

「He won't change just by forcefully sending him to a far off zone for a few months… Even without your leg injury, I don't want you to face him. Because he is a monster I will dispose of one day.」

「My understanding is slightly different from yours on that, but no matter what, he will be attending today's meeting with you. You should brace yourself.」

「... Yes.」

「It's complicated because that fox isn't your political enemy. He claims to be your most avid supporter. He would then use that twisted mentally to trample your heart. I know very well that he has prepared meticulous moves to sculpt you into his ideal monarch.」

The youth ground his teeth loudly. However, he was prepared for this too.

「Will his plan proceed smoothly though? —Things are different now.」

An hour later, with Chamille and Ikuta in the seat of honour, the cabinet members had all been gathered.

「Greetings, Your Majesty. First, allow me to apologize for my long absence from the post of Chancellor.」

Trisnai bowed respectfully. The Empress glared at him with murderous eyes.

「You got the part where you should apologize for wrong. What troubles me the most is that you have returned.」

「When Your Majesty becomes the perfect ruler, I will do as you please. However— I know you still need my assistance. Don't worry, no matter how small, as long as I can make a contribution, I will rush to your aid.」

Facing that man's crack-like smile, Chamille who had not seen something so detestable for sometime felt goosebumps on her back. She told him in disdain.

「... I know you are still an incorrigible madman. I will waste the minimal amount of time on your drivel then. Report, fox.」

With permission to speak, Trisnai acknowledged with his eyes and then said:

「First, the ground inspection mission has been completed. There isn't much to see in the sparsely populated northern territory, so the two months timeline set by Your Majesty is a waste.

It would be unwise to spend my time idling, so I visited a place farther away. And got to witness a dangerous situation.」

「... Dangerous situation?」

The Empress narrowed her eyes and urged him to continue. The fox paused for a moment, then asked:

「Peace Sect— Have you heard about that organization, Your Majesty?」

The unexpected term made Chamille answer with a frown:

「... An organic group that was formed independently in the Empire during Imperial year 720. It was a closed off group that rejected monetary economics, and subsisted on their own produce and barter trade. But after it absorbed impoverished citizens tormented by heavy taxes, it gradually grew in scale. Many priests agree with their ideology, and because of the church's support, it took a long time to completely destroy that organization.」

「Your Majesty's knowledge truly have no bounds.」

Trisnai complimented with a smile. Seeing the girl acting like an outstanding monarch filled the man with joy.

「During my trip, I discovered the emergence of a similar group that is growing with time. And of course, Your Majesty already knows.」

「... I heard wandering citizens are gathering and building villages with their own rules. But it's too great of a leap to link them to the Peace Sect. Even their scale are no way comparable to the Peace Sect.」

「That might be true when I was observing them, but we can assume they will grow larger with time. We can't be optimistic about the future either. I'm saying this because the current state of the Empire isn't as favorable now, compared to the time when the Peace Sect is at their peak.」

「Not favourable? How dare you...!」

Empress poured all her hatred into the glare at the culprit who pushed the Empire into its current dire state. At this moment, Ikuta rests his hand on hers. This calmed the girl down, and she took a few deep breaths.

「... I understand the root of the problem lies with the citizen's unease and distrust towards the government. The aftermath of the Grand Escape by Aldera devotees also plays a part. If we want to disperse their community, we will need to provide accommodations and jobs to the wandering citizens, however...」

When he heard the Empress' answer, Trisnai cast his eyes down and shook his head slightly. This was his reaction when he got the answer he was expecting.

「Please don't raise such a lenient method. Your Majesty, they are criminals.」

「... Criminals?」

「Indeed. They refuse to obey the laws of the Empress, and evade taxes by making up rules to live selfishly— what else can they be but criminals? They aren't impoverished citizens awaiting salvation, but criminals that must be punished. Living in Imperial territory and ignoring the authority of the Empress, there's nothing more insolent than that!」

「... So, what are you trying to say?」

The Empress cut him off and got right to the point. Trisnai said the answer with a deep smile.

「Issue an edict to wipe them out, as an example to others.」

The cabinet was in an uproar when they heard that. The dark-haired youth who had been quiet all this while beside the Empress raised a hand to stop them.

「... Advising the monarch to massacre her citizens. You have gone too far with your villaintry, fox.」

「You are the shallow one for saying that, Ikuta Sankrei. I'm proposing this even though it pains it. The Peace Sect— is just a gathering of impoverished people in the beginning, a harmless group. However, people who heard about them bolstered their numbers, and the Peace Sect made a critical change. Do you know what it is?」

「The group that is short on provisions gradually turned to banditry, right… When the number of people exceeds what the land can support, the residents in a close off environment won't be able to sustain themselves. Even without the overpopulation, they can't get any external support during a crisis. Just one poor harvest will have fatal consequences. When that happens, they have to move away in search of food.」

「If you can think this far, then you will agree with my proposal. My opinion is that we should stop the problem before it happens. In the past, many groups harbour mistakened admiration towards the Peace Sect. Because the Church of Aldera value a simple self sufficient life as an ideal. The ministry and army were fooled by such an impression and implicitly condoned their existence, and this led to that group turning to banditry and seriously endanger the surrounding areas. I will ask again, what's wrong with my opinion of wiping them out preemptively?」

「What I’m trying to say is, there are many available avenues aside from massacre. Provide them with necessities for their livelihood and jobs, reorganizing them into a normal economic system, that’s the duty of the government. Or are you saying we should execute everyone who lost their jobs, and achieve the ideal society with zero unemployment?」

「Providing aid for them to return to society— that’s the right move if the subjects are the unemployed. But you forgot the fact that they are criminals. Scum who take the laws of the nation lightly have no right to receive the good grace of the Empress. Poverty is not an excuse. If they lost their fealty just because of hunger, isn’t that the same as not having fealty in the first place?」

Trisnai remarked without hesitation. Angered by his forceful words, Ikuta clenched his fists.

「... Then, have you ever starved before...?」

The harsh time he spent with his mother in the wilderness flashed across his mind. His memories made the youth squeeze out a quiet voice.

「Have you ever gone without food, and have to shove whatever you can find into your mouth to chew and swallow? When you accidentally eat poisonous herbs or mushrooms, and roll on the ground in pain? Or experienced the fiery pain in your stomach when you are on the verge of starving to death?」

He still remembered the pain as if it was yesterday. Because it was closely related to the tragic death of his mother. Ikuta’s entire body was trembling. There was no end to his rage— that the culprit, who forced him and his mother into such a dire state, taking hunger lightly made him furious.

「There's no way you can know. Those who know won't say 『just because of hunger』—!」

「Alright, time out. Stop here for now.」

When Ikuta was getting agitated, the girl who was observing at the far end of the seats cut him off. The youth looked over to find his junior Scientist stopping him with a gaze.

「Calm down, Ikuta-nii, I know how you feel, but the Empress will be hurt by that too.」

When he heard that, he turned to the side and saw the pale profile of the girl in question. Ikuta regretted his foolish words and grit his teeth— The one who would be hurt the most by the words 'not knowing hunger' was this girl, why didn't he realize that?

「... Sorry, Chamille… I'm sorry.」

Ikuta couldn't do anything except holding her hand and apologizing. Vackie glanced at the two of them, then stood up quietly and said:

「This is probably my job, an outsider who doesn't know her place, to step in here— this is the place to discuss all internal governance affairs, not for you to settle your personal grudges. Am I wrong?」

What he said made all the cabinet members open their eyes wide. Spouting something so grandiosely in such a situation was one of her good points.

「In that case, I hope everyone can differentiate between upstanding character and the value of an opinion. That's a good idea, but we won't adopt it since it's that guy who proposed it; that's a terrible idea, but we will take it since it's this person who said it— if the merit of an idea is tied to a person's character, then the discourse will just be a joke. It will just increase the grudge towards

both parties, and not progress the agenda at all, isn't that a waste of time for everyone here?」

Vackie did not directly interfere with the quagmire of the courts. And that was why she was looking at everyone with cruel equality. The girl told everyone without any reservations.

「With that in mind, the comment of an irregular like me is— both options are equally feasible.」

「「——!」」

「Considering the risk of them turning to banditry and the issue of the law, punishing them is possible; the other option is turning to the spirit of social welfare, pushing the group to disband and return to society, which is also a viable option. Both are based on concrete rationale and predictable results. If we opt to punish them, we will probably need to make adjustments during the execution phase. We don't need to punish too many people to have the effect of making an example out of them.」

Vackie wasn't biased towards either side, and judged that both methods were equally feasible. She showed her impartiality as a Scientist, and turned to Trisnai seated near the seat of honour:

「But, Lord Chancellor. Before discussing the methods to use, why aren't we confirming the most important thing?」

「......?」

「Like I said, this is the Katjvarna Empire, a country under Imperial rule. Instead of the pros and cons, the most important thing in deciding policies is the will of the Empress, right?」

Vackie said before turning to the pale faced Chamille and asked:

「Well, Your Majesty, do you want to punish the people who caused these problems? Or save them?」

「——」

「Their opinions are based on this core difference. Both policies are seeking to better the nation. The only difference is to punish or save the subjects in question. What do you wish for?」

「... I-I...」

Chamille, whose mind is a mess because of the earlier argument, couldn't answer immediately. She wanted to shake her head to clear her mind when Vackie stopped her.

「Wait, don’t think. You are smart, so with time, you will get drawn into logic. You don’t need that right now.」

「— Huh—?」

「I’m not asking who is right, but which method you want to adopt. Use your instincts to answer within three seconds.」

Vackie stared right at her, and the Empress gasped. Not giving her time to compose herself, Vackie started counting down.

「And start. Three, two, one—」

「— S-Save them.」

She said the answer so smoothly that even Chamille herself was surprised. The notorious tyrant Empress expressed her views honestly. The cabinet members were all dumbstruck.

When she heard that answer, the Scientist girl grinned— smiling like a sunflower in full bloom, then slammed her palms on the table.

「— Did you hear that!? That's how the Empress truly feels!」

Vackie shouted down all the cabinet members, and continued with shining eyes.

「She wants to save the suffering citizens! Do not doubt the Empress who stated her true feelings! We have to formulate specific measures to realize Her Majesty's will! That's the reason why the cabinet exist!」

She raised an extremist point without any reservation. And the cabinet members remembered when they heard that— the monarch would set the course, and the vassals should do everything they could to achieve that goal. This was the natural relationship between the monarch and her vassals that the Empire had long forgotten.



「Since everyone understands, let's continue our discussions. Thanks to the Empress, the problem is how to save those people. This discussion is much simpler than before, right?」

Vackie puffed her chest out after saying that. Silence loomed over the officials struggling quietly— a short while later, one of them raised his hand and said:

「... The group in the problematic village are probably tired of being lowly paid sharecropper. Their treatment varies from place to place, but from what I know, there are many farms who employ sharecroppers at a low salary and treat them harshly. Can we use that as our starting point...?」

Everyone's gazes fell on that speaker. Soon, a second person passed through the slightly lowered bar to take action, and spoke.

「Indeed, the lowly status of sharecroppers have been an issue since ancient times. They are forced into labour to erk out a living, and their life is no different from farm slaves… There are provincial laws on minimum wages, but it doesn't change with inflation, and there are many loopholes preventing it from being effective.」

「Before Empress Chamille's reign, there were many instances of farms bribing inspectors and colluding. However, thanks to the strict changes made by Her Majesty, the number of corrupt officials have fallen drastically. If we want to improve their working conditions, isn't this a great opportunity?」

「We will need to revamp the labour union too then. If we let such corruption slide just one time and relaxed our surveillance, these vile acts will happen again. To avoid that, we have to establish a system where each parties can watch over each other—」

The first comment started the ball rolling, and the cabinet members started raising concrete proposals. Chamille watched blankly as they started a passionate debate. The admin officers' intense fear of the Empress faded, and they started showing new life. They could feel the joy of fulfilling their role as admin officers, as a part of the government as as a vassal.

That's right, they were happy. *I want to save the citizens* — They were happy to hear the Empress express a righteous view for a monarch. They were happy to serve such a ruler, who was a role model for them.

After the meeting ended. As the Scientist girl headed down the passageway to her next job destination, someone called out to her:

「...Vackie.」

She turned to find the dark-haired youth and Chamille standing side by side. Vackie approached them with a refreshing smile.

「Yes, what is it, Chamille? You forgot to say something at the meeting?」

The Empress thought about what to say, and opened her mouth quietly:

「I want to thank you… but I couldn't express myself properly. You have been a great help to me at the meeting.」

She shelved away her complicated feelings and simply offered her thanks. After hearing that, Vackie abruptly changed the topic.

「Chamille, have you heard about the tale of 『Nation of Hundred Sages』?」

「...? No, I haven't.」

「Let me tell you then— A long, long time ago, a hundred sages gathered to create their ideal nation. They were all intellectual with a wide breadth of knowledge. With so many smart people, they can definitely create the best country ever— the sages firmly believed this, and set to work founding the nation.」

Vackie said smoothly and Chamille listened puzzledly. However, she didn't expect the next sentence.

「But the nation didn't even last a decade.」

「— Huh?」

「Because their discussions take too long. Everyone was proud of the depth of their knowledge, and refused to back down from their views. It was impossible to decide which one of their many proposals were the best, and the problems were often turned moot during the course of their debates. For example, a war would have ended before they could decide whether to send reinforcements to a neighbouring country.」

Vackie shrugged. The Empress supported her chin with her hand, then answered after thinking about it.

「... It's in poor taste to find problems with fables, but the real sage is the person who can solve this problem. In a gathering of people, there would definitely be a clash of opinions. If they want to solve this problem, they can just rank the authority of these one hundred people— Or rather, a nation would normally adopt such a method before its demise. If not, they wouldn't be sages, but fools.」

「Yes, that's correct. All one hundred sages having equal standing the entire time is not realistic. However, the settings of a fable are just a matter of convenience. It's also the author's earlier works, so don't pick on it too much—」

The girl scratched her cheek bashfully. Chamille suspect that Vackie made up that story, but Vackie said before Chamille could mention it:

「—Anyway, the morale of the story is; 'making a decision' is sometimes more important than 'what is decided'.」

「Hmm.」

「'Nation of Hundred Sages' is a work of fiction, but there are countries in the past founded in similar fashion. The members gathered at a round circle, and the content of the discussion will be reflected in their simple city. In a sense, this is primitive community governance. But in most cases, this simplicity will be lost when the organization grows larger, and a person with authority will take their place. Do you know why?」

「... This isn't just a warning against delusions of grandeur, right?」

「Well, ambitions are just personal things when you just think about it. Only with the support of many people will the path to authority be opened. Why will people support those with ambitions? In other words, why are they handing over their power to choose to others?」

When she heard the topic she was hinting at, Chamille fell into deep thought. The Scientist girl revealed the answer soon after.

「There are a few possible answers, and for me, it's because humans are creature who fear making decisions, but are even more afraid of not making any decisions.」

The two seemingly contradictory reasons made the Empress stare right at her. Vackie opened a hand, and pushed her fist into the centre of her palm..

「For example— we can fight just like last time. You can punch, kick or slap me, or take the defensive and wait for an opening. In the worst case, you can admit your loss to avoid getting hit. However—」

Vackie stopped and pushed her fist close to the Empress' chest.

「— If you don't do anything, you will just get pummeled one sidedly. That's what not making any decisions mean, there are rarely results worse than not taking action. Which means making the best choice is a secondary consideration, the most important thing is to make a decision. This is obvious on a personal level, and when it comes to a group, I'm not joking when I say it's normal for people to just idle around until the end. That's how difficult it is to organize opinions and evaluate them. There are some who even think that authority and hierarchy are made for the sake of solving this difficult problem.」

Chamille crossed her arms in deep thought when she heard that string of logic. Finding her serious attitude to her liking, the Scientist girl continued:

「It's not good to say this before the subject herself, but for the question 『What is an Empress?』, the answer of us Scientists is 『The Highest level Decision Maker』. Results aside, the most important function of the Empress is to 『make difficult decisions』. Be they wise rulers, despots or tyrants, this is the only duty they need to perform.」

Vackie gave her views which struck deep into Chamille's heart. Chamille thought about what she had done as a monarch so far, then asked meekly.

「... You are saying that I haven't met the minimum condition?」

「No, you did. Like I said before, Chamille-chan is supercool. Staying still when forced to make a decision isn't like you at all.」

Vackie shook her head to dispel her worries, then cut into the heart of the problem.

「What I'm saying is, in cases where you can't see the correct answer, don't hesitate and go with your true feelings.」

「—」

「That will do. It will be troublesome if it isn't so. The system is supposed to work based on how you feel about things. If you suppress your feelings, that would be putting the cart in front of the horse.」

The Scientist girl cautioned with a serious face. When the Empress heard that, she stood stiffly in place— she then hung her head with trembling shoulders.

「... You are only saying that because you don't understand how I feel.」

The deep cold voice came out of the girl's mouth, as if by reflex. Your feelings, emotions, and soul— Chamille was sure all that were the ugliest in the world.

「Just follow my heart? Do you know what I— I'm hoping for? You have not known me for long, so how do you know what murky filth swirls in my mind!」

「Yes, I don't know. But I don't plan to stay ignorant forever.」

Vackie stared right into Chamille's eyes and answered without backing an inch. Facing Chamille who had no words, she took another step forward.

「I can promise you this. If you harbour an incorrigible and wrong wish, then it doesn't matter how the establishment might be, both Ikuta-nii and I will stop you. Because that means your soul is ill. Healing your sickness is the most direct way to make your soul honest.」

Vackie grab her shoulders with both hands, and said to her with a firm voice:

「Chamille, I'm a strong dose of medicine. This treatment will be painful, and at times make you feel that your throat is on fire— Even so, I'm still here to heal your soul.」

Chamille gaze locked with those black eyes, unable to say anything. Then she realized— all this while, the Scientist girl had always shown her kindness. When she gets angry, it's targeted at Chamille's self-deprecating words.

Feeling the existence of each other from a close distance, the two girls faced each other for some time— before Vackie pulled away with a blush.

「... Oh, it's starting to feel embarrassing. I will say my piece, leave Ikuta-nii to clean up the mess, then make my exit in a cool manner! Ahaha～!」

The girl laughed loudly as if she was concealing something, then turned and ran down the corridor. When she disappeared around the corner, Chamille said quietly.

「.. Solork...」

「...Yes.」

「... I don't understand. How should I treat her from now on?」

The girl muttered with a baffled face. The dark-haired youth gently held her shoulder.

「Just treat her the same as always. Retaliate when you are angry and chat with her if you want to. You don't need to think too much when interacting with people around your age.」

Ikuta watched the spot where his junior disciple disappeared and said with certainty:

「However— she really likes you. I'm sure of that.」

After becoming Field Marshal, Ikuta had to handle tons of problems. Including the choice of his adjutant, most of it were problems with human resources. Since the army was a group made up by people, the allocation of people would determine the nature of the organization.

「So, big brother, it's about time we made up.」

「Are you serious about making up, you jerk!」

His roar echoed under the blue sky. In order to get a feel of the sentiments on the ground, Ikuta visited the closest field exercise location, where Major Sarihasrag Remeon was training his troops. He was definitely the one who hate Ikuta Solork the most in the entire military. However, the youth's policy is to 'solve the problem in the most obvious way.'

「Stay calm, big brother. He is the Field Marshal, you should maintain the minimum level of etiquettes when speaking with him.
」

「...! You are right.」

On the advice of his younger brother, Sariha reluctantly evened his temper. Ikuta reflected on what happened too. When facing him, Ikuta's mind treaded reflexingly towards agitating him.

「No, it's my bad. I'm not here to pick a fight, but to thank you for two years ago.」

「... Thank me?」

「That's right. Towards the end of the military coup, you accepted our request to send reinforcements. Given the circumstances back then, it was a difficult decision… Thank you very much!」

Ikuta bowed deeply with gratitude. The eldest Remeon son averted his eyes with a conflicted expression.

「... You have no reason to thank me, we didn't make it in time.」

「......」

「Anyway, the Remeon faction is the one who started the coup, and Dafuma province is still hostile towards us… And the coup is why Yatorishino died, shouldn't you bear a grudge against us instead?」

Sariha showed a bitter face. Ikuta shook his head quietly:

「Not at all. The Remeon faction had good reason to rise up in arms… Just like how I reassembled the Rising Sun Regiment, I understand your faction had no choice.」

Ikuta switched his walking stick to his left hand, and offered his right hand. That hand made the eldest Remeon son reel back in surprise.

「Let's wipe off all our grudge with that… The army that had fractured into three will join together again. We are all brothers in arms of the Imperial army, Major Sarihasrag Remeon.」

Ikuta said as he looked right into his eyes. Sariha looked to Sushuraf beside him, and his buff brother nodded silently. With his blessing, the eldest Remeon son reluctantly shook that hand.

「... Alright then. I will acknowledge that my younger brother had been in your care.」

「You got it backwards, I have been relying on Torway all this while.」

Ikuta smiled, and Sariha retracted his hand with a grunt.

「Alright then— so what's your main goal, Field Marshal Sir? You came all the way here because you have a problem with our training?」

「Since you notice, this will be quick. To be frank, training separately lacks efficiency, so link up with my unit.」

The youth announced, and Sariha's face darkened.

「You are telling me to train together with Toruru and that Tetzirich brat...?」

「I know your feelings are against this, but for your unit, this is the quickest way to improve your small unit operations. While we are speaking, Kioka's tactics are evolving and optimizing too. If we are wasteful in our training methods, then we won't be able to match Kioka's speed of advancement.」

The youth's persuasion made Sariha show an enlightened face, but he couldn't accept this so easily. When Sushuraf saw that, he slowly said:

「Understood, we will make the arrangements. Have you spoken to Toruru yet, Field Marshal Sir?」

「Sushuraf?」

Sariha turned around with his eyes wide open. The man who was known for his loyalty to his elder brother stepped out of his comfort zone and said:

「Big brother, if we are going to be soldiers, then this will be inevitable. We have to learn from Toruru, who have made great strides in military tactics. Since this is an obvious truth, then delaying any further would just be a waste of time.」

「...! B-But...!」

「I have learned that aside from supporting you, I have to push you too… Staying stagnant won't help things, so let's move forward together, big brother.」

Ikuta watched the long stable sibling relationship changing with his eyes wide open. With no other options, the eldest Remeon son squatted down with his fist clenched:

「... Damn it! Even you are saying things that old hag Lucika would say...!」

Sariha cursed. The name of their teacher made Sushuraf cast his gaze down quietly.

「... Big brother, Ms Kursk won't ever admonish us again.」

These words weighed heavily on the Remeon brothers… Ikuta stayed silently by their side until Sariha quietly unclenched his fist a few minutes later.

「— How do I put this… Seeing them made me realized how much things has changed while I was holing up in the harem!」

Ikuta returned to base after speaking with the Remeon brothers, then sneaked into the junior officers mess to have lunch with Suya. When he stopped momentarily, she said:

「This is to be expected. Even if you, the regimental commander, aren't here, everyone still has to live on. Don't be so narcissistic to assume that the world will only move because of you.」

「Yes, you are absolutely right… And regimental commander sounds awesome too. When people call me Field Marshal Sir, I would wonder for a moment who they are referring to.」

「The Rising Sun Regiment has not been disbanded, right? Then you are still a regimental commander. You seems to dislike others addressing you by your rank, so I will call you that then.」

Suya said coldly and chewed a piece of naan she had torn off. She swallowed and glared at the youth.

<TL: The raw says pancake, but the story takes place in fantasy India.>

「Oh right— I heard you are looking for an adjutant?」

「Guuh!」

Ikuta was caught off guard and almost choked on the chicken in his mouth. Seeing him pat his chest and reach for his beverage, Suya continued with a calm passion.

「What about me?」

The dark-haired youth took a sip of tea and managed to reply:

「... If it’s five years, no, three years later, I will do that. But you are sorely lacking in experience right now. Your capabilities aren’t on the level of a field-grade officer yet—」

「I know. I was just talking in jest.」

Suya cut him off firmly. Feeling an ever increasing pressure from her, Ikuta waited fearfully for her next words.

「But don’t forget. I still think of myself as your adjutant. I will definitely take that position three years later.」

Suya stood up with a firm declaration, then turned and left. The youth chased after her.

「Ah, wait, Suya—?」

Before he could put his hand on Suya’s shoulder, she turned and swept his legs— and caught him firmly before he hit the ground.

The mess was in an uproar. As the crowd watched on, Suya leaned in so close to Ikuta that their lips were almost touching, then announced as he looked into the youth’s eyes.

「I can still perform a sneak attack of this level— don’t underestimate me.」

Suya helped Ikuta onto his feet, then left without turning back this time. The youth stiffly watched that strong back walk away for quite a while.

*

On the same day, 3 pm. Chamille visited one of the many gardens in the palace, with two familiar guests sitting around the table. After hesitating for a moment, she walked to the empty seat prepared for her. Sensing her arrival, the female knight got up and saluted.

「Your Majesty, pardon me for starting first.」

「...Lucanti. When did you get charmed by her food?」

The Empress said with a sigh after seeing the crumbs on the corners of her mouth. The subject was unaware of that, and shook her head.

「I was only invited to a tea party, I have not been tempted by food! 」

「That’s right. Lulu, want to try this fig cake?」

「Figs! I will definitely try it.」

Lucanti’s attention towards the Empress was drawn away by snacks in no time. Chamille felt an oncoming headache and approached the table.

「She might seem harmless, but she isn’t easy to grow intimate with… She don’t seem to be wary of you.」

「She is incredible in how she judges people in a way different from us. To be honest, I approached her with the intentions of getting closer to you… But I understand now why you want her to stay by your side.」

Vackie propped her cheeks on her palm and watched intriguely at Lucanti who was snacking blissfully. She suddenly snapped out of it and picked up an empty teacup.

「Sorry, sorry, I got too engrossed observing and forgot about the other things. I will pour you some tea.」

「It’s fine, there will be no end if I admonish for just this much.」

The Empress said with a face of resignation and accepted the tea offered by Vackie. She sipped the tea for a short rest, then looked at the Scientist girl again.

「... Well then, what are you planning to do today? You must have a reason for hosting this tea party, right?」

「Well～ I don't have any particular goal. I think it will be better if you have more chances to rest and chat idly.」

Vackie said as she poured tea for herself. Lucanti stopped eating her snack when she heard that and said:

「I'm of the same mind.」

「Ugh… Lucanti, you are suggesting that I should waste time?」

「It is not for me to judge if this is a waste of time… Before my brother passed away, we would often chat and quarrel. Thinking back, those times were precious.」

The female knight said nostalgically with squinted eyes. She was reminiscing about her late brother Deinkun Hargunska, so Chamille couldn't cut in carelessly and held her peace.

「More importantly, the only ones who could quarrel directly with Her Majesty are only Lord Solork and Vackie. In the eyes of your dull witted servant, this is very impressive.」

「Yes, Lulu has great eyes!」

Vackie crossed her arms with a nod. She turned her gaze back on Chamille.

「Honestly speaking, it's clear to anyone that Chamille is very strict and as stiff as a brick. You will suffocate if you stay that serious all

day. Don't you have any hobbies or interests? OR something you want to do, or hope others can do for you?」

「Something I want others to do for me...」

When she heard that, the dark-haired youth's face and her recurring dream flashed across Chamille's mind. She quickly halted the thought, but the Scientist girl didn't miss that subtle change.

「Ah, your face turned red for a moment. What? Are you thinking about lewd things?」

「I-I'm not! Don't speak nonsense!」

「Alright now, there's no need to hide~ It's normal to have such thoughts at our age, right? Since it's a girl's party, let's open our hearts and confess!」

Vackie declared as if this was to her liking. The Empress who was seen through by her raised her voice to hide her wavering:

「T-That might be so…! But you are only asking me questions, and didn't talk much about yourself!」

「Hmm? You mean, you are interested about me?」

Vackie's eyes shone. Chamille shook her head hard.

「No, it's just unfair for me to be the only one speaking. You have to trade intel for intel, that's the basic in doing business.」

Chamille was forced to propose a rule of equivalence exchange, and Vackie nodded at that.

「Yes, you are right. What should I talk about? My experience with men?」

「What are you trying to say in broad daylight… Enough, let me ask you. How did you and Solork first meet? I heard that both of you are disciples of Science.」

「Oh, that. Hmm～ how should I answer? He took care of me when I was causing the most havoc.」

「Causing havoc? For example?」

Chamille asked with her head tilted, and the Scientist girl answered promptly.

「Taking underlings and making them call me Majesty.」

＊

「Good Afternoon, how's your work? The top underling of a certain someone.」

In a corner of the document room that had the lingering smell of old paper, Yorga Daimudaritsu was sitting at his desk and concentrating on the papers before him. Ikuta then talked to him with a casual tone from behind. Yorga stopped his hand that was flipping the paper, and hung his head solemnly.

「...Ikuta. Please don't call me that, my work efficiency will plummet. No one likes their dark history being dragged out, right?」

「Sorry, I don't mean to upset you, just feeling nostalgic. I never dreamed that I will call you that again.」

Ikuta apologized and walked to his side. Yorga read the data once again and continued:

「I can tell you have a lot on your plate. But my eyes are getting dizzy from the situation here too, she really can't sit still for a second. 」

「As expected, she is the same as always.」

「Yes. When Professor fled to Kioka, it was a headache for us. As you know, that girl can't really do normal jobs. So I'm grateful for you roping us in. We don't have to worry about meals, and there aren't many environments that won't bore her.」

Yorga massaged his shoulders that had gotten stiff from all the paperwork, and said as if he just remembered:

「But you have really gone all out. If you just want support for governance, there are better choices, right?」

「I'm still recruiting more talents. You aside, I roped in Vackie for other reasons. I thought I messed up at the start… But from the looks of things, this gamble of an appointment paid off.」

Ikuta thought back to Vackie's words that saved Chamille who was forced into a corner.

「In the current Empire, there aren't many people of Chamille's age who don't fear her and can quarrel with her. No, maybe she is the only one.」

「I agree… She is a difficult child to deal with after all, huh?」

Yorga turned his chair around and asked. Ikuta smiled quietly:

「She is smart, brave and serious— an adorable child… But she thinks she doesn't possess any of these virtues. She took the responsibility for the dilemma that the Empire is facing by herself, and keeps reproaching herself.」

The curse of her bloodline was rooted deeply in her heart. This tragic situation made the youth clench his fist.

「I want to save her. I promised my other half that I will liberate her from that hell… The future of the Empire is just a byproduct.」

「Fufufu… what a scary Field Marshal.」

The youth in a white coat laughed in his trademark conspiracist fashion, and adjusted his monocle.

「In that case, I can hope for her shamelessness to work. I have seen her speaking with Her Majesty a few times, and the atmosphere isn't bad. She will show kindness to the people she likes, so the other party will either leave from disgust, or give up and befriend her. Fortunately, Her Majesty belongs to the latter.」

They smiled at each other, and Ikuta suddenly had a faraway look in his eyes.

「Some meetings will change your life… Chamille has the right to bask under the light too. Just like when I met Yatori.」

When he closed his eyes, he could see the memories of the Rising Sun Regiment from the past. The youth thought about the times he spent with the vermillion-haired girl, and hoped sincerely— that she would have an equally lucky encounter too.

「Because that guy in the sky is too stingy to make arrangements, so I will do it in his stead. That's all.」

Ikuta said blasphemy nonchalantly, and Yorga smiled wryly— He knew that this youth wouldn't just stop with just a wish.



That night, after she finished off the mountains of bureaucratic paperwork. Chamille returned to the restricted area, and welcomed Ikuta who returned from the base as usual.

「I'm home, Chamille. You must have had a hard day too.」

「... Yes, welcome back, Solork.」

They chatted right after he walked in. This was already a daily routine, but the girl still couldn't suppress her heart racing at that moment.

She stiffly looked at the youth as he took off his coat and put it on the rack. He walked right for the canopy bed, then sat down after putting his walking stick aside.

「Come here.」

Ikuta stretched his empty hands to Chamille and called out to her gently. The girl walked wobbly forward as if she was in a trance, and he embraced her with both arms.

「Anything unusual happened when I wasn't around?」

Ikuta combed the girl's blonde hair gently with his fingers and whispered into her ear. The breath on her skin made Chamille's heart race, and she pretended to be calm and answered:

「...Vackie invited me to tea, together with Lucanti.」

「Oh~ so how was it?」

「Terrible. Her tea brewing skill is substandard, worlds apart from Haro.」

The girl complained. Her words made the youth smile.

「 It's too harsh to compare her to Haro for tea brewing. What did the three of you chat about?」

「... We talked a bit about how you and her first met.」

Oh〜Ikuta nodded with an awkward smile. Chamille could feel on her back that he was reminiscing the past.

「I was in High School then, I just talked about this with Yorga just now. She was the same back then, like a rabies dog with fangs called intelligence.」

Rabies dog, Chamille muttered. Ikuta nodded.

「It might be hard for you to empathize, but she had always hated abstract things since the past. Simply put, she would destroy 'meaningless complexity' whenever she finds one. That was a shocker— I was in the vicinity, and received a letter from Professor

Anarai saying 『Your junior disciple is rampaging, rein her in.』」

Ikuta said with a slightly cramping smile, then sighed.

「There is a reason why she is like that… Sigh, I won’t say anymore. She will tell you sooner or later. And of course, you can tell her all the things you had experienced too in retaliation, she will probably be interested.」

「... Is that why you called her here? So she can chat with me…?」

「What do you think? But this palace is too quiet, having a rowdy idiot isn’t too bad.」

Ikuta answered vaguely and suddenly hugged Chamille tighter.

「And of course— it will be better to stay quiet when I spend time with you.」

「——!」

The cheeks of the girl were burning red. Ikuta sniffed her slender neck.

「... This perfume is sandalwood? It has a nice and mature fragrance, but you can choose a more elegant perfume for your age. I will bring

some lavender perfume next time, Vackie will be interested too.」

Solork whispered lovingly. His breathing on her skin melted Chamille’s wits away— a while later, the girl called out with trembling lips:

「..... Solork......」

「Hmm?」

The youth answered her call. The girl struggled for a few minutes before squeezing out her next words.

「...... Can I turn towards you......?」

After a long hesitation, she squeaked out this wish of hers. Ikuta smiled gently when he heard that.

「You prefer hugging?」

She gently held the back of the girl, lifted her up and turned her around. She stared at the youth with moist eyes. Ikuta spread his arms silently, preparing a space for her to come in.

「... Ah, ah...」

After a slight hesitation, a thirst overwhelmed her restraint, pushing the girl forward… She straddled the youth’s lap, and seized the chance of him not showing any signs of rejection to lean on him.

「... Ahhhh...!」

The girl’s breasts stuck tightly to the youth’s chest through their clothes. The strong arms behind her hugged her slender body close firmly. The intoxicating feeling was far beyond that of being hugged from behind, and Chamille couldn’t help crying out:

「...! No! No, Solork...!」

Her mind that was on the verge of breaking warned her. Before she lost herself in her lust, Chamille pushed the youth’s chest to get away.

「I’m turning strange— I’m going to turn weird—!」

「No. I won’t let you go.」

Despite the girl’s plea, the youth denied her efforts and held her even more strongly. The sweet sensation in her body made the girl’s resistance weaken immediately.

「It feels nice to be held tightly, right? But this is just the beginning.
」

The youth hugged her strongly and kissed her forehead repeatedly. A sense of joy coursed through her body like lightning from her head to her toes, and Chamille moaned with a quiver.

「As for the methods to dote on you— I have a hundred more just like this.」

Ikuta's loving kiss shifted from her forehead to her cheeks. She was kissed everywhere aside from her lips, and the girl couldn't say sensible words.

「There's nothing to be afraid of… This is something all children should be given from birth. You are just late in receiving it.」

「— Ugh, ahh— Ahh—!」

Chamille was immersed in a sensation of endless moans. She had long left rational thoughts behind— losing her mind for the youth before her. She forgot everything and drowned in his gentleness. How wonderful it would be if she showed all her uncouth wishes and he would accept it all—

「— Ughh, ahh...」

However— even at this juncture, the girl still prohibits herself from realizing that wish. Just like before, her guilt towards the vermillion-haired girl became a cog of self restraint— pushing her to act. To search for the sensation of cold steel and warning, her hands

reached for her waist—

「—?」

But she didn’t touch the sabre that was supposed to be there. That saber and the youth’s short sword were placed beside the bed together. Realizing her mistake surprised the girl.

「— Ah— Ah—!」

In that case, she had to use pain to stop her lust. Chamille opened her mouth wide and was about to bite her index finger— but two other fingers were shoved deep into her mouth, as if her intentions had been seen through.

「— Uhmm?」

「You can’t. If you want to bite, bite this. It’s fine to bit them off if you want to.」

Ikuta made a bold move to stop the girl from hurting herself, and said to her patiently. There was no way Chamille would harm him, and with her mouth sealed, she could only look at the youth with tears in her eyes.

「... See, you are really kind.」

「... Umm?... Ummmm! ...Umm—!」

There was a slicking sound as the youth's saliva covered fingers caressed her tongue. The stimulation turned into elation, turning her mind blank.

Ikuta gently took out his fingers from the dazed Chamille's mouth. The saliva formed a long string between her lips and his fingers.

「... Hah, ahh… ahh...」

With his nose almost touching the red faced Chamille, the dark-haired youth said:

「I have to apologize first… This is my first time too, so I'm not sure where to draw the line, so my way of doting you might be a little overboard.」

「——」

「However, this is two people's worth of love. I hope you can treat this as the love from me and her, as your parents… Relax.」

The youth put his arms around the girl's back again, and pulled her in close. Ikuta held her powerless body and whispered into her eyes as if to engrave this deep into her heart.

「I love you, Chamille… I will use the entire night to convey my feelings to you.」

He declared without any hesitation. And true to his words, the girl spent the entire time in sweetness until dawn.

＊

The development and proliferation of small unit tactics, and the mastery of Blast Cannon usage. The Imperial Army led by Ikuta Solork started sprinting with these two main pillars. The military as a whole felt dissatisfied and uneasy about the overly young Field Marshal, and after the military coup, it was more advantageous for the younger generations. Craving for the chance to make it big, they searched for a chance through Ikuta's revolution.

「I'm Major Nabufura Shiburu! I had the pleasure of listening to your lecture on strategy a few days ago, and was deeply moved! It would be an honour to learn by your side!」

「Oh, erm, thanks. Well...」

And the youth announced his intention to recruit adjutant in such a situation, so the officers seeking this role flocked to his side. The lines that formed before the office were an eyesore to Sazarf, so he set up a place for interviews. And now, he and Ikuta were scrutinizing the applicants side by side.

「What about that guy? He's driven and has a pretty good resume.
」

「He is passionate, but his eyes are too bright… He is the type to use his position as adjutant as a stepping stone, a bit different from what I'm looking for.」

「That's a problem. The young people gathered now are all like that!
」

Sazarf scratched his head as he looked at the resumes. As the two of them spoke, the next applicant entered.

「Good Afternoon! I'm First Lieutenant Niam Nei who is enthusiastically looking for work～ do you need an adjutant during night time?」

「Hey～ what should I retort about first?」

Sazarf stood up in surprise. Before him, Niam sat nonchalantly into the chair for interviewees.

「I was demoted to First Lieutenant～ but before that, I was an adjutant to a colonel in the past. The Field Marshal is very young, so I should have a chance too～?」

「Are you sane? The Mitokazuruku incident isn't that long ago!」

「Yes〜 sorry, Brigadier General. You seem to know her, but I'm not too—」

「Oh… Right, it happened when you were still in the harem. I will be brief, Colonel Naian Mitokazuruku started a coup with his forces garrisoned in Fortress City Garurujan. Empress Chamille personally went to suppress the revolt, and this woman is the enemy's adjutant...」

「Oh, I see, I get the gist of it. Matthew mentioned that too— First Lieutenant Niam Nei, what do you want to do if you are appointed as my adjutant?」

「I can 'do' whatever you want. What kind of play do you like?」

「Ahaha! — Guards, throw her out.」

Sazarf immediately clapped his hands to summon the guards. Ikuta laughed as he watched the woman get dragged out by two fearsome looking guards.

「Haha— great, I like your shameless mentality. I will never appoint you as my adjutant, but I will consider giving you an interesting post. Anyway, thank you for your hard work, First Lieutenant Nei.」

「Please give me a relaxed post～!」

As she was dragged out, First Lieutenant Nei made a thick-faced request. From how shameless she acted, she was a talent who could do well in an adverse situation— Ikuta thought. She didn't know yet, but that impression pushed her down an arduous path.

「Tch, how unsightly… Hey, next applicant!」

On Sazarf's urging, a troubled looking middle aged officer entered, in stark contrast with Niam. He gave an impeccable salute then took his seat before introducing himself:

「... I'm Major Nudakka Megu. I'm here today… to ask for a chance to redeem myself.」

Sazarf opened his eyes wide when he saw the resume. Ikuta who was equally surprised asked quietly:

「You are the officer who commanded the Igsem search team together with Yatori during the coup.」

「Yes… Although I didn't act like her senior during that battle at all.
」

The Major muttered with a bitter face. Ikuta looked at his changing expression and got right to the core of the question.

「What do you mean by redeem?」

Major Megu fell silent at that question. He then squeezed out an answer from deep within him.

「She's dead, but I'm still living shamelessly… There's nothing more regrettable than that.」

The youth stared at the major who was gritting his teeth with trembling fists.

「Back then— I was tired of killing fellow soldiers, and as the final battle with your group loomed, I handed all command authority to Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino who was far better than me… But I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't just rely on her strength. I gave up thinking back then— and until this day, I can't stop thinking that way.」

「......」

「Why didn't I rack my brains together with her? If I did, we might come up with another plan, and choose another method, then perhaps she wouldn't have died… For the past two years, my mind was filled with such thoughts. Thinking about how I didn't fulfil my role as a senior, and how I can right my sins...」

「... And your conclusion is to be my adjutant...?」

Major Megu nodded to the youth's question.

「She died protecting you… It's shameful, but I wasn't aware of her feelings back then. I know it's too late to make up for it now… But even so, even so...!」

The man struggled clumsily in his attempt to put his feelings into words. Ikuta kindly stopped him by raising his hand, then said quietly:

「I understand— I will be in your care from tomorrow onwards, Major Megu.」

「... Huh?」

The surprised Major Megu turned stiff, and Sazarf was even more surprised. But Ikuta stood up without hesitation and bowed deeply to the old field-grade officer.

「As you can see, I'm younger than you. I will be grateful if an experienced person like you can assist me. I will be leaving many troublesome matters to you in the future though.」

Major Megu stood stiffly. He didn't expect to be hired, and looked confused as Ikuta explained his future duty.

Shortly after, the puzzled Megu left on their urging— and it was Sazarf's turn to question Ikuta's intentions.

「... I-Is this really fine?」

「What do you mean?」

「You are asking me that…? Major Megu is much older than you, and he is a veteran officer from the Igsem faction. Isn't that enough to put him out of consideration as Ikuta Solork's adjutant?」

He expressed his views based on common sense, and the dark-haired youth shook his head.

「Many people misunderstand, but I don't intend to take old soldiers lightly. The same goes for the Igsem faction, I will make full use of all talented people without any discrimination. I want to avoid any clashes between the young and the old, which might spark off a new conflict.」

「You are right… but putting it bluntly, the adjutant you appointed in this situation is an old officer from the Igsem faction, what are you going to do about that?」

「He is my first adjutant. In any case, there can't be just one adjutant supporting the Field Marshal, I will consider balance and choose a young Remeon officer for my second choice. There is a strong trend of the military being biased to the young, so appointing

Major Megu is the right move.」

「Hmm… I see, that's another way of looking at it...」

「Sigh, but that's not why I chose him.」

Sigh～Ikuta leaned back and breathed out heavily as he thought about the past—
She's dead, but I'm still living shamelessly… There's nothing more regrettable than that
— The face Major Megu made when he said that. He regretted for two years over a promising young woman dying before he did— and he was searching for a way to redeem himself, showing a commendable attitude for adults.

「How can I turn him down after hearing him say that?」

Ikuta muttered in resignation, then reverted to his cheerful self.

「Alright, call in the next one.」

「Huh? We are continuing?」

「Of course. I just told you I need multiple adjutants, and this is getting interesting. Let's use this chance to pick some interesting characters. There's still plenty of applicants, right?」

Ikuta took the piles of documents from Sazarf's hand and flipped through them with a grin.

「The more troublesome the work, the more we should cherish the joy we get from it— alright, next! There's a long line waiting, so keep your self marketing concise!」

While Sazarf and Ikuta were interviewing applicants, Sazarf's adjutant Lieutenant, Colonel Melza, was displaying her all rounder skills on her battlefield.

「... This plan is not up to standard. There are too many shortages for a month's campaign. I marked the dubious places in red, use it as reference to amend it.」

She instructed strictly, rejecting the document submitted by her new subordinate. Unlike Sazarf who was a flag officer, her work was middle management, and covered a wide range including administrative matters.

The nurturing of new officers was an urgent task. Two years after the coup, they had not recovered from the loss of personnel yet.

「... First Lieutenant Clarissa. Can you explain how you got these numbers?」

「W-Well...」

「You can't, because you didn't consider the situation on the grounds, and just copied the numbers from your reference materials. We will get another resupply request in three days with your plan. There are quite a number of mistakes, please rewrite it after studying the situation in detail.」

Her subordinates whose mistakes were pointed out returned to their seats sullenly. Lieutenant Colonel Melza looked to the last female officer who had stayed silent. She glanced at the proposal in her hand and called out her name.

「..First Lieutenant Lance.」

「......」

「...First Lieutenant? — Are you listening? First Lieutenant Lance Metrache!」

The Lieutenant Colonel called her again, and the female officer hanging her head snapped back to attention.

「— Y-Yes?」

She finally spoke with a cautious voice that lacked any ambition. Lieutenant Colonel Melza maintained the strict expression of a superior officer, then said curtly with the proposal in her right hand.

「Full marks.」

「Huh?」

「This is a well written plan. The default route, the alternate path, the contingency plans and the supplies for the advance— they are all impeccable, this is good enough to be a textbook model.」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza said with the same face when she admonished a subordinate, so First Lieutenant Metrache didn't realize she was being complimented at first. She noticed a while later, then looked around her with timid eyes.

「... T-Thank you. But...」

「You hate being praised and being in the spotlight?」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza pointed out her mentality right away, which made First Lieutenant Metrache dumbstruck.

「It's natural for you to think that… Honestly speaking, I don't like that attitude. The current Empire doesn't have the leisure of holding back capable and experienced personnels.」

「......」

「Be more confident in your work. You don't have to feel inferior because of the Garurujan incident. The Empress already pardoned you, so I will treat you the same as my other subordinates.」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza announced— just like Niam Nei, Metrache Lance was Naian Mitokazuruku's adjutant during the coup in the Fortress City Garurujan.

「First Lieutenant Lance, what I want you to know is, you are in an environment where the results of your work will be evaluated fairly.
」

「...Huh?」

That unexpected line made Metrache raise her head timidly. Lieutenant Colonel Melza looked right at her and continued fluently.

「Unlike your experience where Mitokazuruku's mood determines everything, what matters here is your capability as an officer. There are no other evaluation standards aside from your capability. The point is, you can't make up for any deficiency in abilities by sucking

up to others.」

「......!」

「And that is why, this is the best environment for you. Our young newly minted Brigadier General might be a little unreliable, and your peers lack experience— do you get it? We need your skills. We need Metrache Lance, the soldier here.」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza gave a forthright compliment, then lightly knocked on the plan with her left fist.

「I won't accept the unreasonable situation of someone who can write such an outstanding proposal not getting her due recognition. Accept the compliment, First Lieutenant Lance. You are worthy of it.」

Her words moistened Metrache's withered heart— tears then rolled down her cheek.

「... Ahh...」

The efforts she made for that man wasn't rewarded, and he even betrayed her in the most vile manner at the time of their parting. This experience closed off her heart. And so, the only thing her superior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Melza, could do was to justly evaluate her work.

「You don't have to cry anymore… It must have been hard on you.」

Her superior officer hugged her shoulder gently, and Metrache sobbed silently for a long time.

＊

「... Hmm～...」

Under the vicious rays of the sun, in the center of the vast and flat proving grounds spreading far in all directions. Matthew watched his men exhausted from making unfamiliar moves, and crossed his arms with a troubled face.

「Working in tandem with artillery units is unexpectedly difficult… Because of the Wind Cannon's ineffectiveness in field battles, we have been putting our heads down and just forcing our way through...」

「There is no reason not to use this powerful weapon. There is a limit to the artilery's movement speed and deployment, so we have to match their pace. But that is difficult...」

Torway beside him answered while watching his worn out troops. Matthew thought for a while, and stated his analysis.

「The problem is that we have not tied down how we should utilize them… Ikuta said in a lecture some time ago that Blast Cannons can

deal a powerful counterattack against cavalry charges, that should be the same for line infantry too. But it is weak against agile and scattered units. We should prioritize the strengthening of this weakness.」

「Then we have to hold a joint exercise with cavalry units. Unlike infantry and cavalry, artillery cannot deploy on their own. We have to consider the effectiveness of partnering it with other units depending on the situation...」

「Hey, wait, Toruru.」

A crude voice interrupted their conversation. The jade-eyed youth turned around in surprise, and saw his brothers from the Remeon family.

「Big brother, second brother...?」

「You are making things too complicated for a start. You might be the elite moving at the forefront of the battlefield, but the Empire is mostly composed of line infantry. It will take some time for us to transition to small units operation. Don't just focus on the future and neglect that fact.」

Sarihasrag continued, ignoring his youngest brother. The second brother Sushuraf added:

「Like what big brother said, we should start by utilizing it in the simplest manner. Because of its extended range, there can be more preparation time between shots. We have to assume we can use it directly in field battles. And this might be the only way to deal with enemy with sturdy square formations.」

Not just Torway, his two brothers also acknowledged the importance of the new Blast Cannons as weapons. However, they explained their views from a different perspective from their youngest brother.

「Anyway, we should fire indirectly at an arc from afar, and when the enemy closes in, we can fire directly upon them. After cutting down the enemy's number, we will send the infantry behind to charge them. The Blast Cannons should be deployed in a fan shape or diamond shape to deal with any attempts to flank us… That should be the basic plan for now.」

「Big brother… But...」

「I know what you are thinking. You think that highly trained small units can charge with the support of artillery fire, right? I won't refute that, and there is no harm in trying that tactic… But before you sprint, don't forget to plant your feet on solid ground. No matter how far ahead you get, there's no point if others can't catch up to you, right?」

Torway was dumbstruck. It had been years since his big brother gave him advice instead of lashing out at him. Seeing the atmosphere about the brothers had changed, Matthew was hesitant about

butting in— at this moment, someone tapped his shoulder from behind.

「... You seem to be discussing difficult things.」

「Uwah...? ...Huh? P-Pommy ?」

Matthew jumped from surprise, and opened his eyes wider when he saw who was behind him. The female pirate, who was a descendent of the legendary Captain Garciev, smiled fearlessly and was elated to be united with the pudgy youth.

「Long time no see, Matthew. Uncle got summoned by Her Majesty again, so I'm here again. They are probably discussing the implementation of the weapon called Blast Cannons.」

「Admiral Jurgus is here too...? You are right, Blast Cannons can be installed on ships too. In the previous battle, we had a hard time dealing with the enemy's Blast Cannon ships, so implementing it is an obvious thing to do.」

Matthew followed the logic and understood the situation. At this point, Pommy clinged to his shoulder and whispered passionately.

「That's how it is… So, are you free today?」

「...? W-Wait! Personal matters will have to wait—!」

Matthew backed away with a blush. He stood beside the troubled Torway who was talking with his brothers, but couldn't calm his heart.

While Polminue Jurgus was visiting Matthew at the proving grounds, the head of the pirate navy, Erynphin Jurgus, was attacking the palace.

「— which means, if you look at the source, our navy are the ones who captured the Kioka navy's Blast Cannons in the first place!」

「......」

「And so, in order to bolster our naval defences, I am urging Your Majesty to allocate a larger share of the weapons to us.」

「......」

「... Hello～? Your Majesty? Are you listening to me?」

Her lack of reaction made Admiral Jurgus furrowed his brows. He was seeking an audience with the Empress in the Deep Green Hall, and had his scummy nature with superficial niceties on full display, but didn't get any good reaction.

The reason was obvious— the Empress he was speaking with was spacing out.

「...Oh? M-My apologies, Admiral Erynphin Jurgus. It’s regarding the implementation of Blast Cannons, right?」

Chamille finally snapped back to reality. Admiral Jurgus shrugged and continued:

「Yes, that’s right. Be it mastering its usage or coming up with countermeasures, there will be a huge difference if we have the actual item with us. I know there is a huge demand for a limited supply, but 10 Blast Cannons is too small a number for the navy, right?」

The boss of the pirate navy demanded firmly at the crucial point. Empress shook her head to clear her mind, in her attempt to focus on the person before her.

「I understand your concern and have evaluated the possibility. However, it will be difficult to increase the supply substantially. I’m not being biased towards the army, it’s just that we have too few Blast Cannons on hand. The allocation of the limited Blast Cannon is done by Solork… the Field Marshal.」

「I plan to negotiate directly with him on this trip, but isn’t he coming? I was looking forward to seeing the youngest Field Marshal in Imperial history.」

Admiral Jurgus looked around him, then pouted unhappily. At this moment, General Remeon who was watching quietly on the sidelines interjected:

「Admiral Jurgus, the Field Marshal asked me to relay a message. I will say it now— 『There are no plans for large scale naval operations in the near future, and it's unlikely for Kioka to start a naval battle. I will send more Blast Cannons to you next year, so make do for now』.」

「What is this, he's just brushing me off! Since he isn't here, then he should be more sincere in his message!」

「Wait, there's more. He also said: 『I know you don't intend to return empty handed, so I prepared a gift as a replacement. How does me giving implicit consent to the navy's tradition of having a 「source of income not reported to the Empire」 sound to you?』...」

When he heard that, Admiral Jurgus who was going to complain further suddenly stopped moving. He then turned his sails artfully with a generous and friendly smile:

「— Teehee, General Remeon. You think I'm an unreasonable person? Just waiting a year will do? Wonderful, we will be happy to do so.」

「... That's great. But that aside, I want to ask you about that 『source of income』...」

「I don’t know what you are talking about— Your Majesty, meeting you is an honor, I will take my leave now!」

Seeing that the situation had turned bad, the boss of the pirate navy brushed off the jade-eyed General’s question and left. On the other hand, Chamille who should admonish him recalled what happened last night and stared blankly into space. At the sight of that, General Remeon’s heavy sigh echoed in the Grand Courtyard.

Chapter 3: Heart Shape

Closing the distance with the subject of your observation was important in analyzing it. The closer you were, the clearer you could see it— and of course, this principle was true for most things.

「... Approach slowly...」

And so, Scientists would observe the subject whenever they had the opportunity. Be it feral beasts or volcanoes overflowing with magma, when their curiosity surpassed their fear, they would take action. The same goes for this girl too— However...

「— Is something the matter, Third Grade Administrative Officer Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu?」

「Uwah, he noticed right away!」

When she was three steps away from her target's door, the subject noticed her this time too. Third Grade Administrative Officer Vackie slowly poked her head in through the office's open door, and said nonchalantly:

「Good Afternoon, Chancellor. You seem busy, but can you spare some time for me?」

「If it’s about administrative matters, then yes. If not, you should leave.」

Imperial Chancellor Trisnai Izanma kept writing at his desk as he answered plainly. That answer made the Scientist girl pout, and she walked in without any hesitation.

「You don’t have to be so cold. In this palace, I’m probably the only one who doesn’t detest you emotionally.」

She said as she approached the desk inside the room. Trisnai continued working without even glancing her way, but the girl wasn’t bothered by his cold attitude.

「Chamille is obvious, but even Ikuta-nii can’t face you calmly. This should be a reason to invite me over. To stop you, there needs to be an outsider to see you objectively.」

The Chancellor’s silence showed no signs of breaking. Vackie stared at his profile with her black pupils.

「You don’t fear being detested by others, and are making full use of that fact instead. To be frank, you feel like a kindred spirit to me. Compared to Chamille, I’m actually more like you.」

「— Like me?」

Trisnai asked when he heard that last part. The girl answered with a nod:

「Lacking empathy with others, and possess a strong sense of ego. There are some who say I'm not human.」

Vackie twirl her hair with her finger then continued:

「For example— if there is an injured person before them, most people will think that 『that looks painful』. But for us, we will just acknowledge that 『he is hurt』. That's the difference.」

「......」

「Because empathy can be suppressed through training and adaptation, the boundary between these two types of people are blurred. However, we become like this naturally. Leaving aside when we got like this, I think we can draw a clear line on this point.」

The girl said confidently. The Chancellor who always wore a mask-like expression squinted his eyes at that.

「For me— according to my analysis, I wasn't born this way, this was the result of growing up in an environment where my feelings were neglected. So I adapted to my environment. When I'm surrounded by people who will accept me, my character softens a lot. Since this would make my relationship with others more comfortable for both

sides, it is natural for me to change my ways.」

There was a hint of a bitter smile on her lips, which vanished the next moment.

「Returning the topic back to you— in this palace, no, somewhere in this world, is there someone who will think for your sake?」

He didn't respond. Taking his silence as an answer, Vackie said without any reservation:

「I guess not. The people in the palace call you a fox or villainous minister, the common theme is that they don't acknowledge your humanity. And you act in a way to deepen that weird impression.」

The Chancellor's pen suddenly stopped. The girl stood beside the Chancellor and slammed a hand heavily on the desk.

「This is the typical construction of a monster by the masses. Everyone unconsciously falls into a vicious cycle. Leaving this alone won't benefit anyone.」

Right after she said that, Vackie's face relaxed and she offered her right hand.

「So, let's start as friends～ I will call you Taririn—」

Before she even finished, Trisnai, who had set his pen down, grabbed the girl's face with his right hand.

「This monkey is more annoying than I thought— shall I get rid of it?」

He rolled his eyes and stared at her with reptilian-like eyes. His monotonous voice was devoid of any humanity.

「Wait!」

At that moment, a skinny youth barged into the room. It was Third Grade Administrative Officer Yorga, who came to the palace together with Vackie for their court appointments.

「Unhand that girl… No, please let her go, Chancellor Sir. I apologize on her behalf as her colleague, and Vackie is also a vassal of Empress Chamille. You don't have the authority to sentence her to death for lack of etiquettes.」

The youth pleaded with trembling lips. The man looked at the youth with a cold piercing gaze.

「What if I tell you that there are many ways to settle this after the fact?」

Yorga felt as if his heart was being grasped. He endured the feeling of fear and detest, and glared back at him.

「... I will get her back even if I have to kill you on the spot. With no regards for the consequences.」

Yorga reached into his sleeves with a determined answer. At that, the Royal Sprite's robotic voice came from the Chancellor's waist pouch.

「— Killing intent detected. Warning to assailant. The death of authorized person will affect the humanity assistance program of the AE system—」

「Skip the rest.」

Trisnai cut short the Royal Sprite's warning. He gently pressed on the Sprite's head and said:

「When I'm serious about killing someone, I won't make threats— do you understand?」

「......」

「Good— don't let uncivilized monkeys roam free.」

With that final warning, the fox let go of the girl’s face and left the office. The Scientist girl scratched her head as she watched him go:



「... Oh, he left. He sure is a handful—」

She muttered. The next instant, Yorga sprinted over and hugged her with his knees on the ground.

「... Don't be reckless, idiot...!」

The lingering fear and his relief after the danger made the youth's body quiver. Feeling him shake with her body, the girl looked down bashfully for the first time.

「Hah～... I was a little rash just now...」

「That's not a little! The most dangerous person in the entire palace is Trisnai Izanma! It won't be a surprise if he killed you with just that!」

Yorga was almost screaming and hugged her more tightly. Hmm～ Vackie grunted and closed her eyes.

「I approached him because I'm sure that won't happen— but you're right. Sorry Yorurin, I made you worried.」

The girl admitted her mistake and apologized, then patted the youth's head to console him. Her gaze fell on the corridor where the Chancellor left when she did that.

「However— the Chancellor doesn't have anyone who is worried about him...」

「.. Solork. What’s this...?」

At the same time. Chamille was staring hard at the unfamiliar object on the table. Ikuta stood beside her rattan chair and explained.

「Yaponiku has a traditional art called Bonkei where you arrange dirt, sand, pebbles, moss and other items within a tray in a way you like. This game is a derivation based on that.」

<TL:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonkei

Ikuta said as he reached for something on the table. Before them was a box without any cover that was 40 cm on the side and 10 cm tall.

「This box has a layer of white sand, with dolls, furniture and mini models placed around it, a sandbox game. I hope you can try this.」

「Hmm… There are no rules? How will the work be evaluated?」
「There are no rules, that’s not the point of this game.」
「Ughh… Then where should I start...」

「Ehh, try touching it. You don’t need to learn anything before playing this game, just do what you want.」

Ikuta urged with a casual tone and just watched from the side with a smile. Facing the untouched sandbox, the blonde girl cast an uneasy gaze towards him.

「... Can you give me some advice?」

「If I tell you a particular way is better, your design will trend towards that direction, right? That won't do. The point is to not make this for anyone, but to create your own sandbox with your own will..」

Spurred on by that, Chamille reached for the various parts beside the box. She took everything she saw, and stopped when she happened upon a particular part.

「... Is this a shell? There's blue sand. Then I will make a seaside scenery. I haven't seen the ocean since we took the sea route to the Hioredo Ore Mines...」

Once she decided the plan, the girl's hands moved smoothly. She gathered the sand according to the designs in her mind, arranging and adjusting the position of the parts into the image she has of the sea. As Ikuta watched on, the plain sandbox became more elegant.

「...How's this?」

Chamille asked, feeling satisfied with her work, Ikuta leaned far towards the table and studied the sandbox.

「Let's see— Oh, amazing! It's so detailed, can you tell me about your work?」

Ikuta didn't give any comments, complimenting the completeness of the sandbox before asking the creator Chamille to walk her through the scene. The girl nodded and said:

「... My theme is a well developed fishing port. The fishermen goes out to sea and fish with their nets, while the children pick shells on the beach.」

「Oh, and that fish?」

「That's the biggest catch of the day. Most of the meat had been cut off to be sold at the market, while the meat on the bones were brought back by the fisherman and his family. They will scoop the leftover meat with spoons, mix it with flour and roll them into balls. They will then grill or boil them...」

「So fish balls? That's a dish found near the coastline, I'm surprised that you know.」

「I only read it from the documents. There are lots of dishes I heard of but never tasted, and that had only increased after I took the throne.」

Chamille said with self mockery. With a hand on her shoulder, Ikuta added gently:

「You will have plenty of chances in the future. Before you get to eat them, feel free to use your imagination. Enjoy the time you spent imagining it too.」

「... Hmm. I see, if it's just imagining...」

Then even I have the right to do so— Ikuta could clearly hear the rest of the sentence she didn't say. Chamille didn't realize what the youth was thinking, and fidgeted with the spare parts.

「... After trying it, this game is unexpectedly interesting. Solork, can I make a different scenery」

「Of course. I'm looking forward to your next sandbox.」

The youth urged her to continue with a smile. The girl nodded and started moving her hands again.

「Well then, I will try making a hill village. From what I know, the most beautiful part about this sort of terrain is—」

The tranquil time they spent together came to an end, and they had to fulfil their role as Empress and Field Marshal. Their day started off with bad news.

「— The situation is deteriorating?」

The Empress asked after receiving the report at the meeting. The admin officer continued nervously.

「Yes, it's regrettable… The group at the borders living a self sustenance life is growing, and has reached ten thousand during the last survey. And as we predicted, this number is too great, and there are some who are starving due to a lack of food.」

Chamille clicked her tongue because they failed to prevent the situation they foresaw from happening.

「... So the countermeasure to prevent this didn't work...」

「... We apologized for our incompetence… We prepared new farmlands and attempted to divert the people there, but few took up on our offer. We spent a lot of time in our attempt to convince them, but their distrust towards the government is too deeply rooted...」

The admin officer was hesitant to go on. Distrust towards the government meant distrust of the Empress. She understood this better than anyone— so her next line was inevitable.

「... I will go personally.」

「Chamille!」

Ikuta beside her gave her a stern look. The Empress quietly shook her head in response to his stare.

「Don’t worry, Solork, I’m not sending a punitive campaign. I’m planning to go personally to convince them. No matter how deep their distrust is, anyone can tell the Empire is serious if the Empress goes there personally.

However, exerting too much pressure might have the opposite effect. I will lead a small unit and make this part of an inspection tour. I will be away for a while, but...」

「And I will be going—」

「P-Please wait, Field Marshal Sir!」

The youth didn’t hesitate to express his intent to accompany the Empress. When she heard that, a female Field-grade officer stood up in a hurry.

「It can’t be helped if Her Majesty has to go, but it is too troubling if the Field Marshal leaves so easily! The army is being reorganized on your orders, and work will be halted if you are absent! It might be fine if the system is already set, but everything is still up in the air!」

From her perspective, this protest was very reasonable, and Ikuta was momentarily dumbstruck. After a pause, she squeezed out a rebuttal.

「... I know the progress will be stifled if I’m away, but...」

「—Solork.」

He was unwilling to let the girl go alone even if it wasn’t logical. His concern made her chest feel constricted, but the Empress tried to tell him with a firm tone.

「... Don’t worry, I will be fine going there alone. You should know that this isn’t my first time. I went out to various places to put down

rebellion before. Furthermore, I'm going there to convince the people, not fight rebels. You don't have to worry.」

「While I was slumbering, you were facing such harsh circumstances… Even if that's true, letting you go through all that alone is something I regret.」

Ikuta said bitterly. She was hesitant to speak because of the air between them, but the female Field-grade officer made up her mind to voice her opinion.

「... Pardon me for my impudence, but even if the Field Marshal can't leave the capital, you can send a trustworthy subordinate as escort. Can you consider this as a compromise...?」

She considered the position of the subject and proposed a middle point that was acceptable for everyone. Even Ikuta couldn't reject this proposal— so he decided to implement the best safety measures for the girl.

After deciding to go personally, Chamille acted swiftly. She made the travel plans and arrangements, as well as which commander will lead which unit there. And the day of departure arrived.

「... Your Majesty, will you be fine riding such a big horse?」

Haro, who had already mounted a horse, asked worriedly. Chamille was riding on a majestic looking horse, and she answered with a firm hand on the reins:

「Don't worry, Haro. I'm not on the level of Yatori, but my horsemanship isn't too bad either.」

The girl responded. For the past two years, she had received consistent training. She was unwilling to compromise the speed of

her army if she couldn’t ride a horse, and immediately learned horse riding after taking the throne. She had a serious nature and a strong memory, so her horsemanship had reached an acceptable level.

「There are no plans for the battle at this destination, so it will be fine for the entire unit to be light cavalry. Lucanti will be my bodyguard as usual, and you are coming too. More importantly—」

The Empress paused here and looked behind her.

「— There are no better escort in the entire Empire, Honorary Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem.」

The vermillion haired middle aged man, the former leader of the Imperial military, saluted silently on horseback.

「You flatter me with your kind words… I will give my all to protect Your Majesty.」

「That’s right! And I’m coming too!」

A carefree voice interjected with no regards for the mood. Chamille looked at the person approaching with her hand raised, then sighed blatantly.

「...Vackie. Because of you, we have more targets to protect, that’s just creating more problems.」

「Not at all! Look, I’m better with a horse than you, Chamille.」

Vackie said as she pulled on her reins, and her mount closed in on the Empress in a zig-zag. Chamille frowned at that:

「... Better than me? … Wait, what’s your basis for thinking that?」

「Because I started riding since a long time ago. The level of experience is completely different from Chamille who just started riding～」

She shrugged with a taunting declaration, and the blonde girl retorted angrily:

「... We will be moving very fast for this campaign. Are you fine with us leaving you if you fall behind?」

「Hmm～? That’s fine too, but how about a race to the first resupply point. The loser will have to play a punishment game.」

「A race? Stop messing around in the middle of a march...」

「Huh～? Not confident?」

The Scientist girl tilted her head with a faint smile. She knew this was a childish provocation, but Chamille couldn’t suppress the reaction in her heart. She accepted the taunt this time.

「... Can you say the same line when you see me disappear beyond the horizon?」

「Maybe I won't～ it's hard to see the horizon behind me after all.」

Sparks flew between the two girls. As the worried Haro watched from the sides, Chamille announced loudly to the troops around her:

「—Move out! We will reach the destination in the minimal number of days! Don't fall behind!」

「Huh? P-Please wait, Your Majesty～!」

Haro immediately led the unit to give chase. Chamille and Vackie, who were riding side by side in front, couldn't see anything aside from their opponent.

The two of them traded leads by the smallest of margins, and the duel ended in a draw four days later. After the conclusion of the intense final battle, the two girls dismounted at the destination and laid sprayed on the grass with ragged breath.

「... Huff～! Puff～! ...Y-You just keep sprinting all out, Chamille...」

「... Hah～! Hah～! ...T-That's my line. You keep passing me...」

They continued squabbling even then. Haro looked at their interaction with a bitter smile as she asked her Sprite partner Mia to pour iced water into two cups.

「Here— Have some iced water. It's really hot today, so Your Majesty and Vackie-san shouldn't push yourself, alright?」

「... Ugh. Sorry, Haro.」

「Pwahh～ I'm alive again～」

The two thirsty girls gulped down the water as if they were competing. After catching her breath, the Scientist girl looked down the road.

「— I can see a village there, is the rumoured group over there?」

Chamille beside her saw the same scene. From the hill they were on, they could see a river flowing from northeast to southwest, and a tight cluster of rundown houses. Farms spread out around the houses, and livestocks could be seen grazing here and there.

「... This matches the report. They are staying in the farmland that got abandoned because of the purge of corrupt nobles, and built a village there. The river nearby is a good water source. An environment suitable for self sustenance.」

「Yes, but only without a sudden increase in numbers. If they accept newcomers indiscriminately, they will reach their limits in no time. This place is already beyond capacity. I don't think that farm can last till its first harvest. They are just making ends meet with the food left behind by the purged landlord. This place isn't set up for self

sustenance at all.」

Vackie stated the facts she saw before her. Chamille stood up with the empty cup in her hand.

「The scouts will be returning soon. This can't go on… right?」

Even without the race with Vackie, the four day journey wasn't easy, but Chamille wouldn't bring her fatigue to the workplace. As she watched that reliable profile, the Scientist girl asked:

「What are you planning?」

「Summon the representatives of these people and negotiate firmly. Since they lack supplies, it should be easy to barter with them.」

The Empress affirmed strongly. Vackie grunted:

「I'm not against this plan— but you should adopt a strong stance of 『Disperse right now』, and not 『Please disperse』. It's fine to show concern, but if they treat you lightly, the negotiation will drag on.」

「Your worries are wasted on me. I told you that I'm a born tyrant.
」

「Well～ it's fine to forget about that.」

Vackie crossed her arms with her head tilted. Chamille looked at the village that had no future, and considered the steps to convince them.

The negotiation started outside the Empress' expectations right from the start.

「— You mean they are all representatives?」

The girl's voice filled with shock and doubt echoed in the tent. It was natural for her to react this way, since there are ten odd people gathered before her as the representatives of the village.

「That's too many. If it's three or four, no, even five or six is fine. But why seventeen? My orders were to gather the representative of the village. Do they not understand the criteria of being a representative?」

Chamille asked an obvious question. The officer leading the group of representatives answered:

「No… These are the right people. They are a community that occurred naturally, and aren't an organized group like us. They will have more authority if they lead more people, but unfortunately, they started off with several leaders of similar sized groups. After

some internal scuffles, they split further and this is the result.」

The Empress clicked her tongue. She expected the group might splinter, but it was more serious than she expected.

「Even for smaller groups, there are exceptions that refuse to be absorbed by larger organizations and remain independent. We passed over some groups that are too small, but still had to deal with 17 separate organizations.」

The officer bowed apologetically after his explanation. Chamille crossed her arms.

「... Looks like I was too optimistic. I thought there would be someone with exceptional leadership since there are so many people.」

「That's right. The Peace Sect had someone like that in the start, but he lost authority after the food supply failed to keep up with demand. The people here might be at that stage now— the late stage before the end of the organization.」

Concurring with Vackie's deduction, Chamille stepped forth with determination.

「If that is so, we should count ourselves lucky to be here before the group dissolved.」

The girl cheered herself up and got to work.

「There might be a lot of them, but it's just seventeen. Not so many that we can't negotiate the terms— first representative, step forward.」

「... Hey, she's here! The Empress is really here!」

News of Chamille's arrival caused a stir in the villages. There were dangerous gleams in some of their eyes, and there was a quiet conversation mixed amongst the panicking mob.

「From the troops she brought, she doesn't seem to be trying to disperse us mercilessly like that time in Garurujan.」

「The Empress summoned the representatives for a meeting. Logically speaking, her goal is to dissolve this group.」

「The group isn't even set up properly, so it won't end by convincing one leader. It will take a lot of time to convince them. Her opponents are unarmed civilians, so her defences must be laxed… This is a great chance.」

「That's right. It has been months since that humiliation we suffered— our efforts in disguising ourselves here have finally paid off.」

His companion clenched his fists and his shoulders were trembling. The man patted his back and said:

「But, how should we deploy? Security is tight around the Empress, and there's the 'Vermillion-haired Igsem' blocking the path.」

「Indeed, if we attack rashly, all our heads will roll— but they are not aware of our presence yet, so there will be a way.」

They nodded at each other and ran to their respective villages.

「—And so, we will prepare an environment where all of you can make a living.」

On the afternoon of the third day after she started her persuasion campaign. The Empress' voice echoing in the tent was mixed with a hint of frustration..

「We will provide support until your livelihood gets on track. If you stay in this place where self sustenance is impossible, you will eventually die out.」

Chamille's will remained firm, but repeating the same thing tens of times had made her impatient. 「Yes...」 unaware of how the Empress felt, her targets answered vaguely with a confused expression.

「... W-Well then, I will discuss this with the others...」

Without giving a clear answer, the representative would return to the village to 「discuss with their companions」. Seeing the same scene play out repeatedly, Chamille couldn't help saying the moment they left.

「... This is making me so anxious! Why can't I get through to them! 」

The Empress sat on her throne frustratedly. This was only natural. Until now, only two of the seventeen groups had accepted the offer, while the others showed no signs of making a move.

Vackie who was observing the negotiations walked over and said:

「Well, Your Majesty, they are not used to discussing and making decisions, and are fumbling unsteadily like toddlers learning to walk. 」

Chamille looked at her with a sour face, and the Scientist girl continued:

「Remember the Nation of Hundred Sages? They are not sages, and the situation is worse than the fable. They can't make a decision because they fear making mistakes, and chose the status quo for their peace of mind. Most groups where the leader lost their authority are like this.」

「......」

「If you want to settle this quickly, you can hint to them that you will use force. Because obeying the ruler is something they are familiar with. It's not too late, want to change your policy?」

Vackie proposed without any hint of sarcasm. The Empress pouted bitterly and answered:

「... I won't use force to intimidate them right now, but I already made arrangements for that. Three battalions dispatched from the closest base are expected to be here by tomorrow evening. The time I will wait is limited. If there still isn't any progress by today, my only options is to force them down that path at gunpoint.」

「That's right. I would like to see them take their first unsteady steps, but we don't have the time. Setting a time limit to give up ahead of time, not a bad move.」

「Not a bad move? I'm just forcing the mistakes of a ruler on them shamelessly.」

The girl's voice was filled with disappointment towards herself. She sighed deeply, then opened her eyes wide to perk herself up.

「Anyway, I have not given up on convincing them, and will work on it for the rest of the day. If summoning them here isn't working, I will go to their village to persuade them...」

The Empress searched for a different way to interact with them. But the Scientist girl shook her head.

「If you want to skip the representatives and give a speech directly to the crowd, I will stop you even if I have to put you in a chokehold. The efficiency of it aside, the risk is too high. I won't expose you before an unfriendly crowd.」

The girl who likes to make extreme theories said something very rational, contrary to how she usually acts. Silence loomed over the tent. Haro listened to all that from a corner of the tent, and couldn't help speaking at this impasse.

「Y-Your Majesty, I will—」

But when her words just came out, another voice rang in her heart.

— *Wait, Haro. This isn't right.*

Haro suddenly froze. The other persona inside her continued:

— *If we take direct action, we might be able to create a situation to disperse those people. But if she was fine with that, Her Majesty wouldn't have come in the first place. She has been working hard to dissuade the habit of dumping all political problems onto the soldiers, right?*

「......!」

Haro couldn't think of an answer, and clenched her fists with her head hung low. The Empress noticed Haro and asked:

「...? Haro, what's wrong? Not feeling well...?」

Seeing the person she should be protecting casting a concerned gaze at the protector instead, Haro felt a stinging pain in her chest for her uselessness. She concealed it with a smile:

「... No, I'm fine. I almost misspoke, my apologies, Your Majesty.」

Haro bowed and apologized to suppress the anxiety in her heart, then stood to the side again— at this moment, a soldier barged into the tent and reported:

「R-Report! There's a conflict between the residents in the west of the village! It seems to be an internal scuffle for food between the different factions...!」

Tension flashed across everyone's face, and the Empress asked:

「Casualties?」

「They're increasing! Some even brought makeshift weapons, it has gone beyond a verbal squabble!」

A few seconds after hearing that, Chamille stated the action that needed to be taken.

「— Honorary Field Marshal Igsem! Take a battalion of cavalry to stop the conflict!」

On the receipt of order, the vermillion haired man who had not said a word all this while responded.

「Pardon my impudence, Your Majesty, but my top priority in this place is to ensure your safety.」

「I know, but you are undoubtedly the best candidate to suppress the mob. Most people will rethink their actions at the sight of your dual blades. To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, it has to be you.」

Chamille stated her reasons behind her orders. Honorary Field Marshal Igsem pondered for a moment and replied:

「... Then promise me, Your Majesty, that you will not leave this place before I return.」

「Of course. I will wait for your good news.」

The Empress placed her hand on her breasts and promised. Acknowledging her intent, the vermillion haired general took action.

「I will be back.」

And so, Solvenares Igsem led a cavalry unit and made a detour for the west side of the village. A few people in the village saw that scene.

「...『Vermillion haired Igsem』 has left their basecamp.」

One of them muttered while looking through a telescope. The man beside him nodded and looked at their armed comrades behind.

「This is a great chance— Move out! Abduct the Empress!」

Roars echoed out loud as a group charge into battle.

「E-Enemy attack! Enemy attack—!」

The soldier barged into the tent and reported, and the gong sounding outside relayed the same information to the entire unit. As the tension of impending battle filled the air, the soldier explained in more detail.

「Y-Your Majesty! Some of the residents are launching a direct assault on us! They aren't using makeshift weapons, but military crossbows and Wind Guns...!」

The word weapon resounded heavily in the Empress' ears. But before she could say anything, another alarmed soldier charged in.

「Report! The two groups who went south after accepting the offer suddenly changed their routes and are approaching us! From afar, they appeared to be armed!」

This report meant that there was an attack coming from another direction. Oh no～ the Scientist girl covered her forehead and moaned:

「... We got played like a damn fiddle.」

「Vackie...」

「They are probably the remnants of the rebel army, the survivors of the rebellions that Your Majesty had put down over time. They probably mixed in with the residents to get supplies, and waited here when they heard that you will be coming.」

Chamille nodded with a serious face. The officers inside the tent started moving in a panic.

「They used the opening when Field Marshal Igsem left the basecamp, then coordinated with the group who pretended to accept our proposal for a pincer attack. A well thought out tactic. Our goal is to persuade them, not subjugate them, so our forces are limited in size.」

「... I will take a look outside!」

Haro ran out of the tent. There was no reason for her to hesitate because of her position as a soldier.

「「「「「「「Wooooaaaahhhh!」」」」」」」

The group was flooding towards the Empress' tent with weapons. The cavalry intercepting them immediately realize that they weren't just any old armed mob. They could tell from that the enemy was trained in a way similar to them.

「Damn it, stay back, rebel...!」

「Don't break formation, the enemy will aim for the gaps and slip through! They are desperadoes!」

The sound of compressed air exploding echoed out, and the horses that got hit neighed in pain. The cavalry roared in defiance at this unexpected battle.

「......!」

Seeing this, Haro realized they were in trouble. As to confirm that, a voice in her mind said:

—… This is bad, Haro. They are throwing everything they have at this chance. They outnumber us greatly, and we are fighting in the plains, so the defenders don't have much of an advantage. Their encirclement will be completed soon…

Patrenshina continued anxiously:

— If Solvenares Igsem's unit returns, the situation will be different. But from the looks of things, we might not last that long. We have to think of a way.

「......」

—? Hey, Haro?

Haro returned to the tent. With the Empress and vassals watching her, she tried to stay calm and told them the current situation.

「... Everyone, the situation is very dire.」

The moment she said that, she could feel everyone gasping. Haro continued mercilessly:

「If they encircle us with their numbers and persistently charge in, the defense lines might get broken before Honorary Field Marshal Igsem returns.」

She said and signalled her subordinate with a look, getting him to bring in the items she prepared ahead of time. Haro pick up a blonde wig— which was styled similarly to the Empress, and said:

「Hence… I have a proposal. Your Majesty, pardon me for asking, but can you please give me two calvary platoons, your robe and the crown?」

The unexpected proposal made Chamille turn stiff for an instant. Realizing her intent, fear flashed across her face.

「... Wait. Haro, are you...」

「The enemy's goal is Your Majesty. So I will use Your Majesty's body double to draw their attention away… I'm much taller than Your Majesty, so I will pick a double from my subordinates. If it works, I can lure most of the enemy away.」

From what she knew, this was the only way to break through their current predicament. Chamille got up and yelled:

「No! Haro, I won't let you do such a dangerous—」

「Hmm. That's the only way.」

Another voice drowned out the Empress' words. Beside the confused Empress, the Scientist girl nodded with her arms crossed.

「I will be the body double. Out of everyone here, I'm the closest to Her Majesty in height. Will that be fine, Major Becker.」

「Vackie?」

Chamille looked at her vassal in shock. The subject herself added calmly:

「Don't mind it, Chamille. Being unprepared for such a situation is the mistake of the vassal. And I'm the one who provoked you, so I will take responsibility.」

Vackie took off her white coat and tossed it aside, then consoled her with a smile>

「Don't worry, I inherited my teacher's fleeing abilities, and will make them run in circles.」

The girl declared firmly. Haro checked her resolve:

「... The double will suffer a terrible fate in the enemy's hands. Vackie-san, are you sure?」

「I will be fine. I don't plan to get caught.」

Vackie snorted. Chamille alternated her gaze between them with shock.

「Wait— Both of you, wait. I won't permit it…! Instead of using you two as bait, I would rather use the forces here to break out!」

The girl was almost screaming, but Haro shook her head firmly.

「Your Majesty. The enemy is deploying their forces to separate us from Honorary Field Marshal Igsem as their top priority. So our best chance of breaking out would be the opposite direction from him… Even if you did that, you will just be further away from our allies.」

「The same goes for you if you act like bait! The further you draw them away, the more isolated you will be...!」

「It's fine. We will set off on horseback, and continuing to flee won't be difficult once we break out. While we are playing hide and seek with them, Honorary Field Marshal Igsem's unit will come to relieve us.」

「But there's no guarantee you'll be safe before help arrives…! Don't go, Haro. I-I'm scared! If you leave the basecamp, and just like Yatori—」

Chamille pleaded with tears in her eyes. Haro walked quietly to her and hugged her gently.

「I will definitely come back. I will return safely.」

The woman borrowed the girl's crown and robe, then said with her usual gentle smile.

「So leave this to big sister, it will be fine.」

— Haro! Hey, Haro! Are you listening!?

Haro exited the tent, and saddled a horse a short distance from the disguised Vackie and the other horsemen. The other persona in her heart was making a ruckus.

— I did say we have to do something, but being the bait in this situation is insane! What's the point if you lower your survival chances!?

Haro didn't answer and did her prep work in silence. Patrenshina called out as if she was going to cry.

— Answer me! What's with you? Are you giving up? Finally tired of living? Because of the sins we committed...!?

「No. I'm not giving up.」

Haro finally answered. She said with a quiet but unwavering voice:

「I think being the bait is the most effective way to ensure Her Majesty's safety. I think we can do it. I'm just making a decision based on that. I don't have any intention of dying here.」

Haro stepped on the stirrup and straddled onto the secured saddle, then took the reins.

「Let's do what we can, Patrenshina… I thought long and hard, but this is the only answer. I can only support everyone as part of the Knights Corp, and protect Empress Chamille alongside them.」

Haro gripped the reins harder. She voiced out the will that had taken shape in her heart.

「I know this won't mend the past. But I'm not protecting everyone because I want to redeem myself. Or rather, I'm willing to commit more sins to protect them. Protect Ikuta-san, Matthew-san, Torway-san, Empress Chamille, and Yatori-san— the people who knows I'm not a good girl, but is still willing to accept me.」

With each name she said, the conviction in Haro's heart grew firmer. That's right— she was doing this out of her own volition.

「Because I have resolved myself, I can face the sins I committed in the past and the crimes I will do in the future. I won't push my sins onto you (Patrenshina) anymore. I won't hang on tightly to the illusion of being a good girl. No matter how ugly and dirty I am— I have decided to shoulder it all and live with everyone!」

This declaration became the turning point in her life. Seeing Haro has resolved herself to take the irreversible step, Patrenshina said uneasily:

—… *You want to accept everything as a part of yourself. Including a mass murderer like me, and everything I have done so far*

.

Haro nodded. The query from her mind came again.

— *If you do this, you won't be able to go back. You can't be a good girl anymore, Haro. Are you really fine with that?*

Haro nodded immediately. Patrenshina finally understood that the results would be the same no matter how many times she asked or how she changed her question.

—… *Is that so… It can't be helped then. These blood stained hands and their skill and power are yours now, Haro*

.

The antihero born to protect Haro's soul finally accepted Haro's change in attitude. Haroma Becker spurred her horse forward, taking the first step of her own will.

「Thank you, Patrenshina— Let's go!」

「—Charge! Charge～!」 「Just one more push!」

The rebel remnants kept attacking. Their surprise attack working motivated them greatly. At this moment, A cavalry unit charged them in single file.

「Uwah...?」

They weren't so reckless as to stop the charge, and the cavalry charged through the group. There was a familiar blonde hair and dark robe fluttering amongst the cavalry, and they shouted loudly:

「— It's the Empress! The Empress is amongst them!」 「Don't let her escape, go after her! Hurry～!」

「Heehee, they fell for it!」

「Don't talk! You will bite your tongue!」

In the middle of the procession escorting Vackie, Haro yelled at her. They were behind her, but she could feel some of the enemy cavalry was pursuing them with more than twice their numbers.

「Running like this will just lead us further away from our allies! So before we get too far— Ready, Vackie-san!?」

Haro urged her to prepare herself, and the Scientist girl bravely answered: 「Got it!」 Haro felt lucky to meet someone who wasn't fazed by this dire circumstances and shouted to her troops:

「Right turn! Into the village!」

She tugged the reins with her left hand to turn. Ignoring the residents screaming because of the approaching cavalry, she charged into the village with her unit.

「Dismount here!」

「Ohh?」

When they entered the zone surrounded by makeshift houses, Haro pulled on her reins, then picked up Vackie, who was disguised as the Empress, off her horse and put her on solid ground. Leaving the horses behind, she told her men.

「From here on, split up and move in sections! Go through the village according to our plan! If you are lost, run towards the southwest! Don't try to link up midway, go all the way to the other end of the village!」

The soldiers dismounted on her orders. Haro took Vackie's hand and hid in the shadows, aware of the eyes on them as she said quietly.

「...Vackie-san, please give me the wig and the robe. It's fine to take off the disguise now, follow them to the other end of the village. I will take care of the diversion.」

Since the pursuers were aware of the Empress' presence here, they didn't need the double to draw their attention. Vackie quickly noticed her intentions and removed her disguise.

—*Is it time for me to take the stage?*

The bored Patrenshina quietly asked for work, and Haro answered positively. Before her, the Scientist girl who had taken off the Empress' attire had started running.

「The real game of tag is starting! Big sister, be careful!」

Vackie linked up with the soldiers and ran deep into the village. After seeing them go— Haro closed her eyes right away and transferred control over to her other self.

「— Damn it, they blended into the village!? Where is she? Where is she hiding?」

Lured by the illusion of the Empress, their pursuers gave chase before losing their target at the cluster of houses. The terrain in the village wasn't suitable for horse riding, so they had to dismount and search on foot.

「Split up and search! We will take that side—」

「Found her～! Over here～! The Empress is here～!」

Before they commenced their search, a cry came from nearby. The eyes of those who heard that changed.

「That way, huh!? Quick, don't let the others steal a march on us!!」
「Wait! We got here first!」

— I can sense the pursuers getting closer. This intel is just meant to disrupt them, but it's very effective against a group that isn't united from the start.

Patrenshina led her men sprinting in the village and muttered to herself. At this point in time, the enemy that was made up of a few different rebel armies had an intense argument regarding who would abduct the Empress. This was natural since the group who abducted the Empress would have a great advantage. And Haro's unit was making use of this weak point.

「First Class Private Nakusa, can you shout it again?」

「Yes Mdm! — Hey, over here! The Empress is here～!」

The Private shouted on her orders. Patrenshina nodded with a smile.

「Good work, your voice sure is loud. We shouted twice here, so the other sections will now do the job of drawing their attention.」

「Yes Mdm! Please leave such works to me!」

Private First Class Nakusa answered with a warm smile. Patrenshina ran alongside them and muttered to herself.

— *Disrupt the enemy, go through the village and get nearer to Solvenares Igsem's unit. Once we link up with them, then our victory is assured—*

She thought as she visualized future developments. At this moment— an enemy soldier garrisoned in the village noticed them and blocked their path.

「Ugh...? Wait, those guys— Kyaa!」

Before any conflict occurred, Patrenshina's throwing knife pierced his forehead. The man slumped and fell over. Patrenshina retrieved her knife when she passed him by, and walked over him without sparing him a glance.

— *The enemy has people with keen observation skills too. We have to take them out before they sound the alarm.*

At this moment, she felt a gaze from the side. Private First Class Nakusa whom she ordered to yell just now looked at her with surprise.

「Major, so you are great at throwing knives. Just one throw from that distance… what a surprise.」

「......」

She was thinking of an excuse, then decided to switch with her other self on a whim. Haro who gained control suddenly almost fell over, then steady herself before saying:

「— A-As an officer, I will have a couple of tricks up my sleeves!」

Why the sudden switch?
Haro fudged over the conversation and complained to Patrenshina in her heart. Patrenshina who had quickly dived inside answered nonchalantly:

— *Because you used my skills, so your subordinates' impression of you will change. You should use this chance to get used to you. If I keep covering for you, you won't be able to adapt during the crucial moments, right?*

Not expecting her consideration of the future, Haro answered with surprise:

「... Yes, you have a point. Sorry Patrenshina, you are right.」

— *What are you apologizing for? More importantly— I can deal with a couple of enemy soldiers, but it will be a problem if there's more of them. My knives are limited too, so we should avoid contact.*

「Yes… Got it.」

Haro nodded solemnly… the precise usage of troops, misleading the enemy and the ability to handle dangerous situations. With the skills she learned as an agent unleashed, anyone who dare block her path would be in for a reckoning.

「... We made it through the village.」

After toying with the enemy and running for tens of minutes, the clustered houses became scattered, and they reached the other end of the village. Haro's group stopped. If they went into the plains that had no cover, they would get hunted by the enemy cavalry, so they couldn't go any further.

「Oh, big sis!」

Vackie who was waving her hand appeared before Haro, and they linked up with the section protecting the girl. There was less cover here, so after linking up with the section that got here ahead of time, they had to prepare for a battle of attrition. When the other sections arrived in similar fashion, Haro told her troops:

「Everyone, protect Vackie and wait for our allies to relieve us. If you see Honorary Field Marshal Igsem's unit, wave flags to call them over… If the situation gets dire, please sprint over to him.」

Haro gave detailed orders to the soldiers under her command, then went back the way they came. Her surprised subordinates called out to her?

「Major?」 「W-Why are you going back?」

Haro stopped and turned back, and calmly answered:

「There are some sections that aren't here yet. I will lead them here and buy some time.」

「You are going alone?」 「That's too risky!」 「It's dangerous to go alone, take—」

The brave soldiers volunteered to follow her, but Hero raised a hand to stop them and said firmly:

「I will handle it, this is an order— keep our losses to a minimum.」

I will leave this place to you— Haro ran back to the village with that. She found a section that appeared to be lost, and ran at them without hesitation.

「Damn it, where are our allies— Oh, Major Becker!」

「The gathering point is over there! Hurry on over!」

She gave them instructions. After repeating that at several different places, a voice came from Haro's heart:

— *the pursuers are getting close, and are almost onto us. Even if Solvenares Igsem noticed something is amissed and rushed over, he might not make it in time.*

「... Yes. But if we can stall them for ten minutes, that will be our victory.」

With that, Haro resolved herself and barged into a nearby rundown shack. The family of three who were cooking a meal turned to her in surprise.

「Everyone, please leave this house at once.」

Haro didn't dally and stated her demand curtly. The mother backed away while shielding the child, and the father stood up with a frown.

「... W-Who are you? This is our—」

Thump! A knife flew past the man's head and sunk deep into a pillar. With the three stiff people and their sprites before her, Haro raised another knife and said:

「I say again, please leave… There won't be a third time.」

Her intimidation worked, and the three of them charged out of the house in fear. Haro spread the vegetable oil inside the pots around

the place, then used a tong to toss a burning charcoal into the oil. A fire started immediately and spread from the pillars to the roof.

「Uwah...?」 「Fire! There's a fire!」 「Damn it, who's behind that!?」

The residents who noticed the fire screamed. Haro sneaked out without getting noticed by them, and muttered while looking at the flame and smoke in the sky.

「With this much ruckus, the pursuers should be drawn here.」

—… You're ruthless, Haro.

「I made the decision, so I will follow it through. I won't force you to be the bad girl anymore.」

In contrast with her plain tone, Haro was clenching her fists so hard that she was cracking her knuckles… During the Northern unrest, Haro had experience setting villages on fire. She had the excuse that she was just following orders back then, but not so this time. Everything was decided by her, and the results were the scene before her.

Haro could no longer be a good girl. She painfully realized what Patrenshina meant by that, but she still wanted to apologize for one thing.

「... I'm sorry. I said some big words, but I can't use many of the techniques I learned as a Phantom...」

— I know. You still can't use skills that inflict direct harm. I will take care of the rest.

A reliable response came from her heart, and Patrenshina once again took control of Haro's body. The tasks ahead made her curl her lips from excitement, and she sang that children's song that started it all.

「—Let's start our wonderful work. Let's get on with it.」

With that song as the turning point, her figure suddenly vanished—two knives were stabbed into the neck and the back skull of two enemies who were drawn by the commotion.

「Hng!」 「Nng!」

The two collapsed from the mortal blow. A third member of the trio searched around him in panic.

「What...! W-Where? Where did that attack come—」

「Here.」

A voice came suddenly from behind, that was the man's last thought before his demise. The artery on his throat was slit, and he lost consciousness in just a few seconds. Three corpses laid in a pool of blood. Patrenshina turned to the residents gasping at the sight of this.

「I need a favour from youー if you are going to scream, can you do so louder?」

She said as she approached the residents with her blood stained knife in hand. The mob scrambled away screaming, and a large number of soldiers gathered, drawn by that commotion.

「There's a commotion over there!」 「There's a fire!」 「Where's the Empress?」

Before anyone noticed, Patrenshina hid in the shadows to observe the situation. She gauged the enemy's numbers and asked the other persona within her.

「... There's loads of them. The diversion worked, but it will be hard to take them out with surprise attacks. It will be risky. How many do you want to take out before retreating?」

— *That doesn't matter, we just have to keep them occupied until the time limit. There's seven minutes left!*

「It's going to be tough!」

The woman said with a smile, then tossed out a firewood nearby. It hit the wall of a nearby house, drawing the enemy's attention.

「Movement! Over there!」 「Don't let them escape! After them!」

They flooded in the wrong direction. Patrenshina tailed them, toying them with further diversion. Not just that, she killed four of them who were momentarily isolated.

Patrenshina counted the knives she still had and muttered with a grunt.

「The terrain here is just fine. There's lots of hiding places, perfect for hit and run tactics. I can't deal with multiple foes like Yatorishino Igsem, but I can toy with them and run around for a while longer.

Her confident monologue stopped there. Patrenshina who was getting optimistic spied three soldiers wearing the same uniform as her getting surrounded.

—Patrenshina! That's our comrades!

「It can’t be! I told them to go straight through the village, just how far off did they wander to get here!?」

Patrenshina grumbled and dashed straight ahead. Once she was in range, she threw out two knives. They stabbed two enemies in the back of their heads, and Patrenshina kept a low profile to slash at the five remaining enemies.

「Kyaa–!」 「Uwah?」

She slit the throat of one, but that’s as far as she got. The second backdash to dodge her blade, pulling away with his crossbow readied. Patrenshina clicked her tongue, and stood between them and her troops.

「M-Major...」

「Don’t stop, run!」

Patrenshina pushed her men with her back towards them, telling them to flee. But as a result, she couldn’t go yet, with the four armed enemies blocking her retreat.

— They have surrounded us...

Haro’s voice echoed in her mind. Patrenshina muttered 「don’t worry」 with knives in both hands.

「... Phew—!」

She threw two knives at the enemy before her, and they blocked with their arms to avoid a fatal blow.

「—Hah!」

But when her arms were fully stretched out, Patrenshina still had a knife in each hand. She swiftly twisted ankles and waist to turn 180,

and swung her arms up this time, attacking again in the shortest amount of time. The unexpected counter caught the two soldiers trying to sneak up on Patrenshina by surprise, and they stumbled backwards. Patrenshina immediately slipped past them.

「... Good! I'm out of knives, but we can—」

Confident of victory, Patrenshina charged into an alley— at that moment, a hand shot out from her blind spot and grabbed her arm firmly.

「—?」

「I caught you, woman.」

A pair of hostile eyes pierced through her, and Patrenshina's face cramped as she muttered 「Oh shit.」

「「「「「「Woaaahh!」」」」」」

The enemy slowly found where Haro's troops were located. They formed ranks and tried to push through, attacking any opening they could find.

「Vackie-san, it's dangerous! Stay back!」

The buff soldiers shielded the admin officer girl behind them. Vackie could observe the situation from the gaps between the soldiers, and analyzed what she saw:

「... There are fewer enemies than expected. Big sis is really diverting the enemy's attention by herself...」

Imagining the struggle of the woman who wasn't here made the Scientist girl clenched her fists.

「...Ah～ Really now...! That's the problem with Scientists during times like this, there's no god for us to pray to...!」

「— Gahh!」

Her bones were creaking. The woman was thrown onto the ground, and boots kicked her mercilessly in the breasts.

「Playing us like a damn fiddle, huh. How many of us did you kill?」

The men kept kicking Patrenshina who was on the ground. As the four of them were focusing on this task, their comrades from behind rushed over with a panicked face:

「Hey, the enemy is gathered over there!」 「The others will steal a march on us! Hurry up and kill her!」

A pair of cold eyes glared at his two comrades who wanted to hurry on over.

「Saw any signs of the Empress?」

「Huh? No...」

「No, huh— look at her empaulatte, she is a field-grade officer, unlike the grunts out there. Someone like her should be by the Empress' side until the very end.」

The man cast his gaze to the woman and said with confidence. When they heard that, the others also noticed that something was off.

「A high ranking officer moving alone to act like a diversion. I can't help thinking that the Empress is nearby— you guys, search around here.」

On his orders, his companions searched the rundown houses in the vicinity with dubious faces. Patrenshina's eyes wavered as she searched for a way out, but a voice came from her heart.

—… Switch, Patrenshina.

「... huh? Wait, Haro—」

While the woman was still confused, control of the body had returned to Haro. Feeling the pain from the kick to her stomach, she muttered:

「... Our mission is to buy time, and you worked hard for that. And so— enduring the pain is my mission.」

Haro said with resolve in her eyes. They pulled her hair to lift her face and ordered curtly:

「Answer me, woman! Where's the Empress?」

Haro pursed her lips and ignored him. Seeing her reaction, he ordered his comrade beside him:

「Pinkie.」

When he heard that, he bent Haro's pinkie finger in the opposite direction, then pushed his boot against it. The interrogator gave him a look, and the man put his weight heavily onto it.

「——!」

Snap! Haro's pinkie finger was crushed with the sound of a splat. Haro's shoulders quivered, and the man pulled Haro's body up and asked with the same tone:

「Where's the Empress?」

「...!...」

She ignored him again. As if he expected that, the man signalled his comrade again.

「Ring finger.」

The second finger was crushed in a similar fashion. The pain came from her fingertips to the top of her head, and cold sweat drenched Haro's forehead.

「Where's the Empress?」 「— middle finger.」

「Where's the Empress?」 「—index finger.」

The sound of crunching bones kept echoing out. Their conversation was quiet, and there weren't any screams of pain. If someone only listened without seeing them, they wouldn't realize that this was an interrogation. The only thing that hinted that was Haro's body that was spasming from the pain.

「Where's the Empress?」

The exact same question was answered by silence for the fifth time. The man ordered with a light nod.

「Thumb. This will hurt.」

His comrade executed the interrogation on his orders. He positioned his boot on Haro's bent thumb and shifted his weight onto it—fracturing the thumb.

「～～～～～～～～!」

Haro's teeth were chattering. Her mind turned blank as the pain from her crushed thumb coursed through her body.

「Impressive. You didn't even scream at that?」

The man said as he looked at Haro's face. He could see a firm light in her eyes, which made him grunted.

「Her eyes are still strong… Changed the torture for her left hand.」

Leaving Haro's right hand where all the fingers were bent in the wrong direction, the man gestured to his comrades to deal with the left hand. When one of them pushed a blade into her fingernail, he continued the interrogation:

「Where is the Empress?」

No matter how much she was tormented, Haro didn't bear any grudge towards them.

She could easily think of an even more cruel torment. She remembered that most of the torture was inflicted on others, not her— That's right, those were the memories of things she had done, and remained in the hearts of Haroma and Patrenshina.

In her dark and bloody memories, she was always torturing them with a smile. In contrast, the people before her were gentlemen. After all, interrogation was just a means to them, and they didn't find any joy when inflicting pain on their subject.

Ironically, it was easy if they only inflicted pain… Compared to the people who enjoyed abusing her and her siblings.

「... Enough. Stop.」

Not seeing any results, the man raised a hand to stop the torture. Inspecting her body who had suffered serious abuse in a short amount of time, the man said with a sigh.

「... Five broken fingers, five stripped fingernails, whipped everywhere. You are staying quiet after going through all that?」

In contrast to her miserable state like a pierce of blood soaked rag, there was not a shred of fear in her eyes. The man accepted the fact that this was a waste of time and approached Haro.

「If time permits, I want to take my time with this interrogation— but I can't let this drag on.」

With a face of resignation, he drew his knife and pointed it at her unwavering eye.

「Last chance, woman— light or the Empress, what's your choice?」

「......」

「If you choose light, I will let you go. If you choose the Empress, I will blind you and leave you here.」

The man was counting on her fear of an irreversible loss, and not her instinct to avoid pain. Instead of threatening to kill her, this was more effective in most situations. The reason was simple— it was hard to imagine death, but anyone could imagine what eternal darkness was like.

「Haro, say something! Or you will die, Haro!」

— *Switch with me! He will really do it! Can you hear me, Haro!*

Her partner Mia in her pouch, and Patrenshina in her heart kept calling out to her. Haro heard them, but she didn't react.

Because— the pain made her feel at peace. The idea of the retribution for all her crimes being inflicted on her made her so at ease that it overwhelmed the pain she was feeling. So she didn't feel any hatred or hostility towards the enemy, and was even grateful towards them.

「Not a word? … You will regret this, I will take one eye first.」

The knife tip was pushed towards her eye. The cold blade drew closer.

At that moment, Haro thought regretfully about the scenery that would be taken away by that blade.

「— Ahh—」

It was too bright. The light that the 「Knights Corp」 members had given to her was all the light of her lifetime.

— *Come back to us. We are waiting for you.*

Those words echoed in her ears. She could recall the voice of the youth who accepted all her sins.

She couldn't accept it— Haro suddenly thought. She wasn't afraid of losing the light. Even if both her eyes were blinded, the light in her soul would never disappear. She would embrace that light in the darkness until the end of her life.

What she couldn't accept— was dying before she could pay back the light she was given. They were her salvation, but she was heading towards a meaningless death that would only break their hearts.

— *Haro is a good girl and a bad girl. And all of us love you.*

She had a wish— she wanted to repay those words. Repay him who saved her soul from hell, and the comrades who chose to accept her. Before she could repay their kindness, she couldn't die yet.

「—Ahh...」

Power surged out from her. Her hands that could only feel pain burst forth with unbelievable strength.

「—— Ahhhhh—!」

「Uwah—!」 「—Ehh?」

Haro roared. She regained freedom in one hand from the enemy's lapse and the slippiness of the blood . She grabbed the man's wrist with her left hand that had lost all it's fingernails, shifting the tip of the knife from her eye to the ground.

「Waaaahhhhhh!」

「Tch—!」

The man looked surprised for a moment, but he calmly flicked her arm away.

「Damn it, she's still...!」

The man clicked his tongue to imply that resistance was futile. That intense struggle would only delay her inevitable loss of the light...

「—Seh!」

With a flash of cold steel, the man's vision tumbled without any warning— He didn't realize he was mistaken until he lost his head.

「— Huh?」 「What...」 「Uwahh—!」

After that man fell, the soldiers were cut down one after another. The saber and short sword left no survivors in their wake. They didn't even have the chance to resist and the dual blades dominated the place. Haro who was freed crawled desperately in the bloodbath.

「Hah, hah...!」

What caused this change? She couldn’t spare the faculty to think. Even so, she still moved her hands frantically through her blurred vision, searching for something to use as a weapon. Shortly after, Haro touched a hard gunstock. She couldn’t tell if that was a crossbow or a Wind Gun, and lifted that weapon with her injured fingers…

「Well done, Major Haroma Becker.」

The vermillion general stood tall in the direction she was looking at.

「Her Majesty is safe, and has linked up with my men. Your diversion mission is a success.」

He told her that irrefutable fact, boldly grabbing the crossbow with one hand to push the tip of the bayonet down.

「You have accomplished your mission. So— you can relax your grip on consciousness.」



Hearing his crude words of concern, Haro understood she was saved and lost consciousness– Solvenares Igsem held her battered body silently, as if he was handling a fragile object.

After linking up with Honorary Field Marshal Igsem's unit which had crushed the enemy's main forces, Haro's diversion unit returned to the tent where the Empress was waiting. However, the commander who should be reporting the success of the mission was brought to the Empress on a stretcher.

「... Sorry Chamille, I made the big sister push herself.」

「— Haro...?」

The girl called out to her with a trembling voice, and approached with unsteady steps. And she saw the bloodied and tattered uniform dyed a dark shade of red. She saw the pale face of the familiar gentle woman.

「Ah— Ah— Haro, Haro! Get a hold of yourself, open your eyes, Haro—!」

Chamille wanted to embrace her in a crazed state, but Vackie grabbed her arm to stop her.

「Don't wake her up… The whipping was much harsher than we thought. From her injuries, big sis suffered more than 30 whips. It won't be a surprise if she had died.」

「——!—」

「The fingers on her right hand are all dislocated or fractured, and she lost all the nails on her left hand… It won't directly endanger her life, but there is a risk of infections. She needs medical treatment as soon as possible...」

Vackie called for a medic. When Chamille who couldn’t help just stood there stiffly, another soldier rushed towards her with a different report.

「— Your Majesty! The group representatives are in an uproar! Because of the earlier attack, they seemed to think we are hostile towards them...!」

「— Ah, ughh...」

「Your Majesty, leave this to us. Big sis will be fine, please deal with the residents.」

The Scientist girl’s words managed to give direction to Chamille’s stalled mind. Driven by her sense of responsibility and obligation, the Empress moved with stiff steps.

「I— I will be right there.」

She left the large tent with the soldier and headed to the small tent where the representatives were waiting. The Empress took deep breaths on her way there, and said loudly in a majestic fashion.

「Please remain calm! There are outlaws mixed amongst you, but I’m not assuming everyone is a rebel! When the dust have settled, we will continue the talks—」

「Please show mercy～～!」

Chamille’s words were drowned out by a wail from one of the representatives. However, he wasn’t speaking to the Empress. The mob didn’t even look her way, and were begging the soldiers who walked in before the Empress desperately.

「We are not like those guys!」「That's right! We are not trying to rebel!」「We just want to ask for help!」「We are thinking the military will help us if we gather here...!」

The representatives bared their selfish hearts. The Empress' face twitched. Not because of what they said, but because they didn't even ask her for help even though she came here personally.

「We will follow the military's orders without any questions! We won't resist! So please, save us from our predicament!」

「Don't abandon us! Please, please...!」

The representatives ignored Chamille and continued pleading. The girl felt a sense of emptiness as if her existence was being rejected. She was standing on an invisible wall and looking at the world outside. She couldn't even erk out the strength to yell and draw their attention— She could only stand stiffly by herself in a world where no one would turn and look her way.

Chapter 4: An Unprecedented Opening

The unit led by the Empress reached the capital's eastern gate. When he heard that news, Ikuta put aside his work on hand immediately.

「Hah! Hah! Hah!— Ughh!」

He charged out of the palace and hopped onto a carriage. When the coachman told him the route to the eastern gate was mobbed with people, the youth switched to walking without any hesitation. Seeing his unsteady figure hurrying ahead, Torway and Matthew rushed to him.

「Ik-kun!」

「Hey, don't push yourself, retard! I will give you a hand!」

They supported Ikuta from both sides. The youth rushed forth with the help of his friends, and soon saw the cavalry advancing between the crowds. When he saw the carriage in the midst of the procession, Ikuta was certain they were in there and yelled:

「—Chamille! Haro!」

Pushing aside the cavalry stunned by the sudden appearance of the Field Marshal, Ikuta's group approached the carriage. Chamille leaned out of the window to confirm their presence, then opened the door for the three of them to board.

「—Everyone.」

A familiar woman was secured to the bed inside the carriage. But she looked absolutely pitiful. She was bandaged everywhere and her right hand was stabilized with a board, showing the harsh violence that she suffered.

「Haro-san!」「Haro!」

Torway and Matthew rushed her way. They couldn’t say anything as they looked at that woman from close up.

「Sorry— I got, a little banged up. But, tis but a scratch. I will, get better soon—」

Haro couldn’t even talk properly as she raised her arms to show them she was fine. Ikuta stumbled to her side and held on to the edge of the bed and trembled.

「These… These wounds aren’t nothing! … You’re not fine...!」

Uncertain about the extent of her injuries, he couldn’t even hold her hand to encourage her. The anxiety tortured Ikuta, and he tried his best to maintain his composure.

「...! A doctor has been arranged, we will send her straight into the palace.」

Everyone concurred with a nod, and they took the carriage and went straight into the palace under the watchful eyes of the troops. After sending Haro into the room where a good female doctor was standing by, they waited in the corridor as she tended to Haro.

「Doctor, how’s… how’s Haro’s injuries?」

Shortly after the medical examinations ended, Ikuta asked the female doctor on behalf of everyone. She answered with a standard poker face:

「... She suffered intense torture in a short period of time. Her injuries had been tended to, so there isn’t much I can do. Her consciousness is vague because of her fever, but that’s natural given

her injuries. For now, we have to be careful to stop her wounds from getting inflamed.

Once there is no risk of infection, her life won't be in danger… The worrying thing would be the long term effects of her injuries. Especially her fingers on her right hand… Some of them might not be as nimble after healing. There's also her left hand stripped of fingernails, and the whip wounds all over her body… I will do my best, but there will still be scars.」

The details of her injuries turned their faces gloomy. The female doctor sounded cheerful out of concern for them.

「However— I'm impressed by her strong will to recover. During my examinations, she must have felt excruciating pain whenever I touched her wounds, but she didn't complain one bit. As the saying goes, a healthy body starts with a healthy mind… I shouldn't say this as a doctor, but having the will to get better will affect the speed of recovery. You can encourage her to keep her motivation up.」

After saying these words of concern, the female doctor reverted to her serious face.

「... Well then, there's another thing that bothers me. Before that… Can everyone tell me what's your relationship with her?」

Matthew and Torway looked at each other. Ikuta gave a clear answer:

「We are like family to her. Please think of it that way.」

Seeing no objections from anyone, the doctor nodded calmly.

「... I'm a little hesitant, but in that case, I will let you know. Aside from the injuries from this time, she had many old scars on her. It

had faded with time… But those are probably traces of abuse during her childhood.」

Ikuta was silent while Matthew and Torway turned stiff. Only Chamille didn't understand what she meant and looked confused.

「That's all I have to say. I don't know what this means, and have no intention of prying.

… But from your reactions, it's unnecessary for me to say so. I will take my leave now, and will return for a follow up examination at the same time tomorrow.」

The doctor turned and left, and the blue coat on her shoulders fluttered in the air. After she left, Chamille lost balance.

「—Chamille!」

「... Sorry. I'm fine, just a little dizzy...」

She might be saying that, but the girl in Ikuta's arms were clearly looking unwell. Torway said when he saw that:

「Ik-kun, we will stay with Haro-san. Bring Her Majesty to rest.」

Ikuta nodded without hesitation, took Chamille's hand and left. As the two youths watched on, they exited Haro's room.

When they returned to the living room of the restricted zone, Ikuta wanted Chamille to lie on her bed, but she shook her head and refused. The girl sat on a rattan chair with downcast eyes, and the dark-haired youth bent over to her eye level and said:

「Chamille. Are you fine with not lying down to rest?」

She didn't answer that question. A short moment later, the girl said weakly:

「... I couldn’t do anything.」

Her voice was filled with self reproach. Ikuta held her hands and listened.

「I talked big when I set off– the people I want to lead to a safe haven didn’t acknowledge my existence from the very start. From start to finish, they only seeked help from the soldiers… Even when I’m before them and promised to provide assistance, they didn’t ask me for help...」

Her uncontrollable emotions made her hands that were held by Ikuta tremble.

「Not just that, I failed to see through the rebel’s trap and fell for it… To save me, Haro risked her life to act as bait. She lured them away with a small group of men– and got hurt badly for her troubles.

I’m such an incompetent ruler. I showed my unsightly side and how unpopular I was with the citizens. My retainer almost died because of me, and I came back shamelessly without accomplishing anything. I’m not even good enough to be a despot. Tell me, Solork. Just what, just what am I?」

「—Chamille!」

The youth couldn’t bare seeing the girl continue, and held Chamille closely as if to stop her words. However, the girl struggled violently in his arms.

「Don’t be so gentle to me, Solork...! You can discard me, strangle me, or anything! Punish me with your hands! Let me suffer the pain Haro felt! Or else, I, I— will go insane—!」

As Chamille went on, her breathing got more ragged. Ikuta sensed that her mental condition was very fragile, and after some hesitation, he opted to use a forceful means.

Ikuta held Chamille with one hand and took a small bottle on the table with his other hand. He then took out a sachet of powder from his pocket and poured it in. He shook the bottle gently, then moved it to the girl's lips.

「— Drink it, Chamille.」

「... Hmm? Hmmm—!」

The liquid suddenly injected into the girl's mouth surprised her, but she still drank it on reflex. Seeing the movement in her throat, Ikuta moved the bottle away. Chamille covered her mouth and coughed for a moment, and felt very drowsy.

「.. Solork… What, did you do...」

「Just sleep for now, Chamille. You don't have to think about anything.」

The youth embraced the girl again and whispered into her ears. As she slumped weakly into his arms, he looked up at the ceiling and lamented:

「You are not a tyrant nor a despot. You don't have any obligation to be a good ruler in the first place. You are just Chamille— and that's good enough.」

「... Hmm, ugghh...」

When she woke from her slumber, the first thing Chamille saw was that she was lying on the right side of the bed, and the dark-haired youth holding her hand and lying face down beside her.

「.. Solork? This is...」

The girl sat up, careful not to disturb him. When she saw the bottle on the table before the rattan chair, she understood everything.

「... I see. He made me drink medicine when I was hysterical...」

The bitterness was still on her tongue. Realizing the youth had prepared sedative in case she went hysterical, the girl almost cried at the care he had shown her.

「... Sorry, Solork. You must be tired from handling work you are not familiar with...」

Chamille caressed the cheeks of the sleeping youth with her fingers… His features that still had a hint of childiness when they first met had matured now. Who knows if this was just purely from the passage of time, and that the pressure she placed on him didn't play a factor?

「... I can't even deal with my own regrets… Just how unsightly can I be...」

Her tears welled up, and Chamille covered her face with both hands. She didn't know what kind of emotional state she would be in if this went on. With that in mind, she quietly got off the bed, careful not to wake the youth, then walked out of the room to reorganize her feelings.

Chamille spent a lot of time with Ikuta in the living room, but she would go elsewhere when she wanted to think by herself. The roof of

the restricted area was one of those places. Most of that space had an open view of the sky, with good ventilation and benches.

「... Good evening.」

However, there was already someone here. Vackie was sitting at the edge of the bench by herself, completely different from her lively self during the day.

「...Vackie? What are you doing so late at night?」

「... Well, I thought Chamille would come if I stay around here, so I asked Lulu to bring me in.」

The two girls looked at each other under the moonlight. Chamille sat in the center of the bench, and Vackie who was some distance away asked a little reservedly:

「Can I… sit beside you?」

「... Suit yourself. You don’t usually ask for permission, right?」

The Empress answered baffled by her strangely reserved attitude. The Scientist girl stood up, walked over, and sat gently beside Chamille.

「... Sorry.」

「... What are you apologizing for?」

「For big sis Haro’s injury. You are probably blaming yourself, but it’s mostly my fault… The residents there were increasing in an unnatural way, so I should have prepared for such a possibility. I didn’t notice because of my arrogance.」

Vackie apologized with the lines she prepared ahead of time. Chamille wasn’t the only one who had regrets.

「When we were waiting for Honorary Field Marshal Igsem's rescue at the edge of the village, big sis took on the role of diverting the enemy alone. I don't know the details of what she did, but thanks to her effort, there were less enemies coming our way, and we kept our losses to a minimum. If she didn't lure them away… I might be the one who gets interrogated.」

「... I don't intend to place the blame on you. No matter what, I'm the one who made the decision.」

The Empress said coldly. Vackie clutched her sleeves tightly.

「Don't take my share of the responsibility.」

Not unexpecting Vackie's voice that was breaking a little, Chamille looked at her in surprise. Vackie sniffled and said again.

「Big sis is amazing… I only volunteered to be bait because of my own principle. That's just being narcissistic with extra steps. If I didn't think I was at fault, I wouldn't have done so.

But big sis is different. She isn't responsible for the mess, but still took the initiative and shouldered the risk… That might be natural for a soldier, but big sis is an officer, so she's too high up the totem pole to risk her life. No one can blame her if she reluctantly waited until it was her turn.」

「......」

「Big sis seems to be confident of buying time, and also took into account the possibility that she would be tortured by the enemy. From her ability to spread falsehood during her escape, she must be an agent… No, that doesn't matter. The only thing I can say is, big sis is an amazing person who can risk her all to protect others.」

She expressed genuine respect and admiration for her. Vackie continued recounting her recent memory.

「When I visited her today, I saw a large group of soldiers gathered around the palace… The troops really admire her. Is that how all medics on the frontlines are? To the people she rescued from death's jaw, she must be a goddess.」

That must be so, Chamille thought. Haro's kind smile and gentle demeanour was dazzling on the battlefield.

「The troops who aren't officers can't enter the palace, and they knew that too. But a large group still came. Their efforts are futile, but they still wasted their precious vacation here.」

「......」

「Whenever I see a scene like this, that's like looking at a light I won't ever have. I'm envious of people who live outside the boundary of self interest and benefits… I can't live like that. I'm just an avatar of narcissism, and can't love others more than I love myself.」

Vackie hung her head shamefully and told her. Chamille was curious about the reason and asked:

「... Is it because of how you grew up?」

「Maybe.」

It was a surprisingly curt answer. Vackie would usually keep talking without being prompted, so her attitude intrigued Chamille. When Vackie noticed that, she smiled weakly:

「... Want to know? Although this is a long and boring story.」

After a short pause, the Empress slowly nodded. The Scientist girl nodded too and began.

「I'll tell you then. I used to be a shrine maiden.」

— The Church of Aldera didn't have shrine maidens. The mission of the priests was to spread the teaching of their God, and was fundamentally different from shrine maidens who were possessed by the gods.

But there were exceptions in the vast Empire, and Lasukaryeta Town in the western territories had one such local religion. Every village there had a shrine maiden. Their duty was to listen to the revelations of God and guide the village. Due to the nature of their position, they were revered as living gods.

And of course, such faith was viewed with disdain by orthodox Church of Aldera believers, but there was a reason why Lasukaryeta town developed their religion in such a direction. Because they were located in the rural borders deep in the mountains, it had been centuries since a priest was stationed there. As a result, they had to pass down the teachings themselves– leading to such a drastic difference. This could no longer be reversed even if the Church of Aldera despatch an actual priest to them.

「— My job was to perform divination for all sorts of things, and convey the will of 『Lord Aldera』. But tradition dictates that the shrine maidens have to maintain a pure body, so my life was restricted in all sorts of ways. I can't leave my home except for special occasions, and I was forbidden from interacting with children my age to avoid impure influence… So the dim and heavy mansion was my entire world.」

Chamille held her breath. Even with her vivid imagination, It was hard for her to imagine that.

「The enclosed environment was suffocating, but my education as a shrine maiden made it even more unbearable. They demanded me to memorize tens of hours of scriptures which was enough to make my head explode. After learning addition and subtraction, the next thing was memorization. Even now, I feel like puking just from recalling the first line of the scriptures.」

「That's really… heavy.」

「I was a gullible child back then, and memorized it seriously. My memory was good for my age, so the adults praised me. But a question pop up in my head one day— what's the point of doing this?」

Vackie said. In hindsight, this idea was the start of everything.

「When this question was on my mind, Professor Anarai and his disciples came. The Professor didn't hold back in his research, and was interested in Lasukaryeta's unique culture. He had some run ins with the locals, but he soothed them with all sorts of methods and somehow, he sneaked into a religious ceremony.」

Vackie smiled. Chamille smiled with her.

「It wasn't the entire scripture, but the prayers that day were very long. When I returned to my house exhausted, a white coat flashed across the window. I looked outside curiously, and as expected, the Professor's group had snuck into the courtyard… They would be lynched by the mob if discovered, and thinking back, they were really reckless. I locked gaze with him through the window– and with just one look, I was entranced by the sensibility in the Professor's eyes.」

The girl's tone even had a hint of fear. Chamille gulped and listened.

「Driven by my hunger, I spoke directly with the Professor. It was less than 30 minutes, but every word moved me and filled me with

surprise. At that moment, I saw for the first time how vast outside the building was— and the doubts I had about my situation increased exponentially.」

Vackie thought back on the excitement she felt back then, and her tone grew heated.

「I couldn't help asking the Professor that question. What's the point of living everyday according to the teachings and memorizing scriptures every day? The Professor answered— 『if you want to confirm the meaning of an action, you just need to stop doing it all for that one time』.」

「— Stop doing it all...」

「That's right. So I gave it a try. I broke all the taboos in succession. Only reciting the prayers in the beginning and spouting nonsense midway. I had a feeling that most people won't notice– because when I'm doing my best reciting the prayers, most of the adults would close their eyes and doze off behind me–.

And so, my opponent wasn't human right from the start. I asked God through my actions. I questioned God's will, intention– and God's existence.」

Vackie said passionately. By recounting her past, the dark passion the girl had been suppressing became clear before Chamille's eyes.

「About a month later, the village held their annual harvest festival. It was a rare bountiful harvest and the villagers were overjoyed. I was permitted to go out during this festival, and everyone revered me with words that conveyed similar meanings— Thanks to me performing my shrine maiden duties, God blessed the village this year and so on.」

The girl had a sarcastic look on her face. What they said to her without any ill will were actually refuting all the efforts she had put in all this while.

「I realized at that moment— There is no god. All that is meaningless.」

Her sarcasm was gone, and Vackie's voice turned hollow, which sent a chill down Chamille's back.

「That night, I set fire to the house and escaped, then left the mountains with Professor Anarai's group— I have not returned there ever since.

On the other hand, the rage I felt that day kept burning in my heart. The unnecessary procedures, tedious and roundabout ceremonies, and made up history to prove legitimacy and authority— whenever I see such unnecessary complications, I had to destroy them to sooth my wrath. Even my name too. I couldn't stand my stupidly long name, and randomly called myself Karo. Because I think it would be more practical to use as short a name as possible.

Back then, I hit it off with Yorurin, and we did whatever we wanted with the knowledge we learned under Professor Anarai. We exposed the meaningless parts of customs, then disassemble them before assembling them in an easy to understand manner– for us, that was what Science is about.」

The Scientist girl said emotionally and reached her hand out into the air. Chamille followed her movements and looked up at the night sky.

「The prey we target are people who were bound by archaic customs that don't bring happiness to anyone, or fellows who tricked the uneducated citizens for their own benefit. Similar to the corrupt

nobles you purged. I can’t stand such people, and when I see the citizens being exploited without realizing it, it feels like I’m looking at my old self, which lit a rage in me that borders on frustration. I had no intention of acting all high and mighty, and was just trying to vent my fury. I even bared my fangs at anyone who tried to stop me— Even now, my senior disciples would still tell me 『you were like a mad dog back then』.」

「... Mad dog...」

「Ikuta-nii joined us right then. When Yorurin and I chose our next target and was scheming to set him up, he butt in and made his move first. 『Hey, you two. You pulled off some big stunts, but don’t think you are the smartest person in the world』— That’s the first thing he said to me.」

Vackie looked nostalgically into the night sky. Chamille could easily imagine the Ikuta Solork who was younger than when she first met him.

「After he got the better of us in several other similar situations, we got the chance to communicate properly, and he asked me to tell him my back story which I had just mentioned. Ikuta-nii thought for a while after that, and said 『You two, come to this place at the same time two weeks later』 and left. That response of him caught me off guard— and two weeks later, I was greatly surprised.」

The Scientist girl thought back to the impact she felt back then and continued:

「The first thing Ikuta-nii said was :『I investigated the meaning behind your name.』 To be honest, I didn’t get what he was saying. This might sound strange to you, but they didn’t tell me the meaning of my name when I was in the village. I heard it’s a combination of

the unique words used in ceremonies, intentionally keeping the meaning of the name obscure so my parents wishes may come true… I wasn’t entirely uninterested, but since it’s an arrangement of meaningless sounds, so it’s probably a term to praise god or something.

But Ikuta-nii didn’t think so. Mairitsuuinvuakkyen— He couldn’t even pronounce it properly, but he thoroughly researched the meaning behind that combination of sound. He picked out the names of over 1,000 villagers from Professor Anarai’s records, and researched similarly sounding archaic language from all over the Empire— and finally brought the answer to me.」

「... What does it mean then?」

Chamille waited with bated breath. Vackie said with a bashful smile.

「『We love you』— That’s what it means in common Imperial language when translated.」

This was the most unexpected answer Chamille got today. The Scientist girl’s gaze towards the stars wavered as if she was dreaming.

「I was dumbstruck when I heard that explanation— then I remembered something from when I was young… before I was sent into that house, when my parents died in a landslide before I was four years old. I remembered the gentle words they said to me in our ordinary life.」

「......!」

「I learned that my name has a meaning. It isn’t a prayer to god or a frivolous show of might— this name was given just for me.

At the same time, I realized this was true for many other things too. I was driven by my rage and destroyed many things, but maybe they had important meaning behind them, that I couldn't unearth with some effort.」

Vackie recounted and shrugged with an awkward smile.

「I lost my fangs the moment I thought that way… I then reflected on my ways, and here we are now. Hey, it's boring, right?」

「... No.」

The Empress couldn't properly convey her thoughts with words, and just shook her head. The Scientist girl looked at her again and continued:

「Chamille, for something like blessings, discovering it's existence is as important as the blessing itself. There are idiots like me who only notice many years after the fact.」

「......」

「Big sis Haro risked her life because she wants to keep you safe. Just like my name, this is her blessing to you… So, it's fine to be sad about big sis getting hurt, but don't hate yourself because of that. If you refute yourself, wouldn't that waste the effort put in by big sis...?」

「......!」

Chamille was tormented by feelings of gratitude and self loath. Unable to bear with it, she got up and wanted to flee. Vackie said to her back.

「... Listen to me, Chamille! Be it big sis, Ikuta-nii, the members of the Knights Corp or me— we aren't staying by your side because

you’re the Empress! We like you as a person and cherish you… that’s why we want to be with you!」

Chamille couldn’t help sobbing… She hated herself more than anyone in the world, and she couldn’t say anything back.

The next afternoon. In order to meet the owner of the room, Torway visited the Field Marshal’s office in the Central Military Base.

「... Ik-kun, I’m coming in.」

He pushed the door open after knocking, and saw the dark-haired youth sitting at his desk and staring at papers with a drawing on it. The documents he had reviewed were piled up high on either side.

「I visited her this morning, and Haro-san is getting better. She needed an attendant’s help, but she was eating properly.」

「Yes, I saw her this morning too. I hope she recovers enough to sit up soon...」

Ikuta said as he browsed another piece of paper. Torway was intrigued, then leaned in and asked:

「... What are you looking at? This is… a drawing of the scenery?」

「This is a sketch of the sandbox made by Chamille, there are eleven of them.」

He answered with a look at the pile of sketches on the table. Torway studied them, and saw that the theme of each scenery was different.

「This game was created by Professor Anarai with Yaponiku’s Bonkei as the basis. It’s designed to observe the mental state of someone. The scenery created by someone will reflect their mental state— and reflects their personality and psychological issues.」

「I see...」

「All her sceneries have fine details without cutting any corners, showing that she will take responsibility for anything she starts. Other than being meticulous, it also showed her yearning for sceneries she had never seen before, and the beauty of her imagination… However...」

Ikuta furrowed his brows and took out a doll from his pocket.

「She created a myriad of sceneries— but she didn't include herself there. She excluded this girl doll unconsciously, and never used it.」

Ikuta gritted his teeth as he looked at the sketches melancholically.

「Do you understand? These beautiful sceneries are her dreams, but also represent her rejection of herself. She isn't part of the blissful world in these sketches.」

「......!」

The jade-eyed youth stood stiffly after he realized how deeply rooted Chamille's mental issue was. The dark-haired youth turned to him and asked for help:

「Hey～Torway, what do we need to do? How do I break out of this problem?

W-What should I do to save this child from this curse?」

A heavy silence loomed over the room. No one could answer his question as time passed by slowly.

The proposal to hold a Three Nation Conference was sent to the Empire via Kioka.

「... A report from the patrols.」

In the open plains with howling wind, the soldier reported with a solemn voice. The girl who was looking eastward beside the dark-haired youth turned around when she heard that.

「The surveillance unit at the new national borders report no abnormalities— as per the last notification, the Kioka army appears to have cleared away from our path towards the destination.」

「... Is that so.」

She was waiting for this report, but the Empress replied uneasily with a nod. This was only natural since their opponent was Kioka. Since they didn't detect any obvious traps, they had to be wary of well laid strategies– However, they couldn't stop moving out of fear.

「All units, move northwards— towards the venue where the Three Nation Conference will be held, Ra Saia Alderamin.」

The Empress made up her mind and ordered them to move out. On that out— thousands of soldiers in neat formation marched forth, and the vanguard set off in the northeast direction.

「... Ridiculous. They are inviting us to a summit meeting at a time like this?」

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summit_(meeting)
>

Turning back time a few months ago. In the conference room inside the Central Military Base, General Terushinha Remeon furrowed his brows at the sudden invitation to a high level meeting.

「From the present territory held by us, we have to cross the Grand Arfatra Mountains to reach Ra Saia Alderamin, but Kioka doesn't have to do so, which makes the burden that each side has to

shoulder unequal. Furthermore, we have far too little to gain from attending this Three Nation Conference.」

The jade eyed General expressed his logical view. The dark-haired youth seated beside the Empress slowly said:

「I'm of the same view– However, Kioka appears to have considered all that when they made this proposal.」

After saying that, he raised the documents sent by Kioka. The attendees from afar couldn't see the words clearly, so the youth briefed them verbally.

「They kindly offered to provide us advance payment if we agreed to the meeting. Specifically, the partial return of the old eastern territory. As you can see from this, this will give us a route that goes around the Grand Arfatra Mountains.」

The documents included a map of the territory they were willing to return. And of course, Kioka's wording was 「cede」 and not 「return」. The generals were suspicious of this generous offer, and General Shiba who was seated beside General Remeon said with a serious face.

「... That's really generous of them. They are not doing this based on the results of the meeting, but treating it as a necessary down payment for attending the meeting?」

「That's right.」

Ikuta answered immediately. At this moment, Brigadier General Sazarf who was seated at the end of the table said:

「... If there isn't any obvious traps, this means that Kioka has a reason to hold the Three Nation Conference even if they have to go that far?」

「That’s probably it.」

The one who answered this time was the Empress. The top military officers all looked her way, and she searched through her distant memory:

「The political leader of the Kioka Republic— their current Prime Minister, is a type of politician who is always observing others. He has total control over the management of talent, and has the tendency of not discriminating between friends and foes in his human resource management.」

At this time, she looked at Ikuta beside her and continued:

「He definitely has his eyes on Solork this time. The new Field Marshal not from the Igsem nor Remeon faction, and gained support from both sides. He probably didn’t expect that. In order to understand how the Imperial Army has evolved with the change of command, he wants to meet directly with Solork. For that man, the intel he can gain from this meeting is far more valuable than some land at the edge of their borders.」

Chamille was sent to Kioka as a hostage in the past, and understood him the best out of everyone present. Ikuta acknowledged this point and added:

「... For Kioka’s strategy against other nations, they value the accuracy of their intel highly. And I have no intention of taking that lightly.」

「That means— Your Majesty and Your Excellency plans to accept the invitation?」

General Remeon looked at them sternly and asked. Ikuta then pointed out the rationale behind his decision.

「Attending this conference is meaningful to us in several big ways. First— with the partial recovery of the old eastern territory, we can go around the Grand Arfatra Mountains and send our troops to Ra Saia Alderamin. In the past, we were under pressure from the north one sidedly, and this situation will drastically improve. The Aldera Holy Army garrisoned in the Grand Arfatra Mountains will probably pull back in the future.

Two, we will establish diplomatic ties with the Ra Saia Alderamin Holy Nation, in a limited sense. The Grand Escape by the Aldera devotees is a result of our nation breaking ties with their religion. The priests in the Empire also have deep rooted unhappiness about this. The conference will be a chance to resolve these issues.」

He agreed with the reasons raised by Ikuta, but General Remeon has not accepted it yet.

「But that's only if the Ra Saia Alderamin Holy nation is serious about attending the Three Nation Conference...」

Before discussing the Empire's attendance at the conference, he remained doubtful about that point. If the representatives of the three nations weren't present, then negotiations would be impossible. However, Ikuta picked up a document and answered his doubts.

「Please look at the tail end of this paragraph. This meeting is proposed by the Pope.」

It was as he said, there was a personal seal used by the Pope of the Ra Saia Alderamin Church. General Remeon fell silent, and General Shiba beside him snorted.

「... That country who joined forces with Kioka to invade our nation is proposing a Three Nation Conference? There must be a reason why they changed their attitude so much.」

「Presently, I can’t make any concrete deductions. It might be possible that all this is to lure Chamille and me into a trap. However— it will be a pity if we miss this chance out of fear.」

Weighing the risk and possible returns on a scale, Ikuta judged that the latter was more important. The youth shored up the reason behind his decision.

「I can’t motivate myself to fight a war where I can’t see the face of my opponent. The political and military leaders of all three nations probably share my sentiments… Recently, the war seemed to be cloaked in darkness for far too long, and that made the image of our enemy blurry. For all of us, this is a good chance to evaluate each other’s position again.」

When he pointed that out, the generals fell into deep thought. Ikuta pushed the meeting towards accepting the proposal.

「I plan to attend the conference and take all safety measures seriously. During the conference, I will schedule the surveillance of enemy movements in all ways, so there won’t be the stupid mistake of an invasion during my absence— are there any objections...」

「Of course I object.」

A familiar voice interjected. The soldiers looked towards the door and saw the Imperial Chancellor standing there in his khaki attire.

「The Three Nation Conference is obviously the biggest stage in diplomacy. As the highest ranking admin officer, I will naturally want to attend. Are there any objections to that?」

For someone of his status, it was impressive that he was thick skinned enough to say that. Ikuta stared at him expressionlessly.

「... Fox, so you already heard?」

「Fufufu, Your Majesty and the Field Marshal can be so mean at times, leaving me, the Chancellor out and deciding such an important matter on your own.」

Trisnai kept emphasizing his position as a Chancellor. Ikuta shrugged:

「... Well,. Of course you will want to join in. You have been monopolizing the diplomatic relations between the Empire and Ra Saia Alderamin all this while. If we set up a proper channel, it will inconvenienced you, correct?」

「What are you saying? I just want to fulfil my role as Chancellor with this chance.」

The fox claimed shamelessly. Ikuta and Chamille glared at him, thinking that it would be a pain to deal with the other national leaders at the summit, and they had to deal with him too.

「...!...」

In the brigade that set off on the Empress' command, there was a large carriage that was like a mobile palace. She was walking in circles around one of the rooms on the carriage. Ikuta couldn't stand it any longer and said:

「...Chamille. I know you are uneasy and have many things to think about, but if you are this tense now, you won't last long enough to make it to the destination. There is still a long journey ahead, you have to learn to relax.」

「... I know. I know, but...」

The girl knew that she had to relax, but she just couldn't do it. She looked at the dark-haired youth with downcast eyes and spoke hesitantly:

「... I will be straight with you. I-I'm scared. This is my first diplomatic meeting with another country as a ruler. Will I be okay negotiating with the cunning rulers of other nations...?」

Chamille trembled weakly. From her attitude, it was clear that she had lost confidence after the incident with the Peace Sect. Ikuta held her hands and encouraged her with a steady expression:

「That's why the diplomatic team and me are here to assist you. Even if you are ill and bed ridden when you reach there, the conference won't be canceled immediately. Rest assured, no matter what kind of situation props up, we can deal with it!」

Chamille showed a complicated face. She was glad to hear the youth say that, but she refused to rely on just his words. Ikuta realized how she felt and nodded with a smile.

「Sigh, I know you can't switch gears so easily— so even if I have to be a little forceful, I will make you relax.」

When the army halted, two visitors boarded the large carriage.

「Jang jang jang～jang! Here I am～!」

「Fufufu… Sorry for disturbing during your rest, Your Majesty.」

「... I'm not spooked this time. I'm expecting this after all.」

Vackie and Yorga's visit made Chamille sigh. When the Scientist girl heard that, she approached without any reservation as always.

「Hey, come on～ if you feel bored, then tell me, Chamille. At times like this, you should find your friends and party, right?」

Vackie said boldly with a smile. Chamille ignored the weird parts of her words and sat down in resignation.

「And so, I brought all the table top games made meticulously by the 『Disciples of Anarai』! From masterpiece to garbage, you can pick any that you like! Don't assume you'll have any spare time when we reach our destination!」

「This will stave off any boredom… Although I have a feeling this will exhaust me mentally instead.」

「Fufufu… Which game would you like to play, Your Majesty? Personally, I'll recommend— this game that might look like snakes and ladders, but actually involves complicated real estate management...」

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sugoroku
>

「Let's not simulate work in our games, Yorga. Our goal is to kill time during our travels, so let's pick one that's more down to earth.」

「How about this one? Mr Pig, Mr Bull, Mr Sheep… there are lots of animals in this game, so it's definitely down to earth.」

「Hmm, it does look cute. What's the content like?」

「A livestock management game so real that you can hear the songs of the farmboys. Whoever can overcome the crisis of plagues, bandits, predators, cashflow, and breed the most livestocks will win! Even for cows, breeding them for milk and for meat are completely different!」

「Change. And Vackie, you probably misunderstand what down to earth means.」

Time passed in a rowdy fashion. After this brief respite, the Empress' large carriage forged onwards.

During the second half of their long journey, they could clearly feel the change in the climate. When everyone needed a blanket to keep warm during their sleep, the Empress' brigade finally reached the Church of Aldera's capital.

「Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik and her retainers, welcome everyone to this northern lands.」

An old priest led a large group to them, and welcomed the visitors with a gentle smile. The Three Nation Conference would normally be held in the diplomatic building built just for such occasions, and there was no exception this time. The three buildings surrounded the central conference hall, and the diplomatic teams of each nation were arranged to stay in one of these buildings.

「Since you hailed from a region unaffected by the cold, the temperature here probably feels harsh. Please proceed into the building to warm yourselves...」

「Thank you for your kind hospitality. However, please show these 6 from my diplomatic team in first. I need to freshen myself, and will head in a little later.」

That was to be expected, the Empress couldn't step into a foreign nation's building without any precaution, so using an excuse to cover it up was a good judgement. The other party made this offer knowing that might be the case, and wasn't upset by the refusal. The old priest bowed with a smile and acknowledged:

「I understand. Please do not hesitate to ask us for anything.」

「Well then, please permit my troops to make camp in the fields, and if possible, provide them with firewood?」

「I will make arrangements immediately.」

The welcome party agreed to the visitor's request politely, then returned to their building. Chamille saw them off, then rubbed her cold hands together while observing her surroundings.

「... It seems like Kioka isn't here yet.」

The girl mumbled softly. Given the distance and the different dates of setting off, it was only natural for a party to arrive before the other. In any case, they arrived earlier than Kioka. The party that arrives first has the head start to grasp the terrain, giving them the advantage in terms of security.

「Investigating the building, scouting the layout… Anything else we need to do right now, Solork?」

「Don't worry, leave these to us, you need to relax more.」

The youth advised her and put a hand on her shoulder. Feeling his warmth through her clothes, she turned her gaze to the diplomatic hall before her.

「... Is the Pope already inside...?」

「Probably.」

Thinking about the opponent they would meet in a few days, the two of them turned quiet for a moment— and rain drops fell on their head.

「... It's raining. It will be bad if you catch a cold. Chamille, go back to your carriage for now.」

After sending the Empress back to the large carriage, Ikuta alighted by himself, stood at the tent set up by the soldiers and stared at the diplomat. That wouldn't achieve anything, but just like Chamille, he couldn't help trying to do something.

— *How troubling, am I losing my cool too?*

Sighing at his own reaction, the youth closed his eyes and nursed his forehead.

— *I understand Chamille feels uneasy. This is my first time directly taking part in diplomacy too, can I handle it as well as the military affairs?*

The more the youth thought, the more questions he had… He was good at negotiations, but that might just be natural for the other national leaders. After all, Chamille and him were the youngest participants for this conference.

— *The worst thing is, I can't bring any of the Knights Corp members with me. If I can discuss things with them, it will ease my worries, and we might come up with some good ideas...*

Ikuta couldn't help thinking about pointless things. Haro was nursing her injuries, while Matthew and Torway had to focus on training the men. He couldn't even bring along officers on good terms with him, such as Shiba and Sazarf, so Ikuta was practically fighting alone.

「— But it's fine.」

As he was thinking about that, he thought he heard a nostalgic voice beside him. Ikuta looked at the short sword on his waist, and held its hilt.

「... That's right. I'll never walk alone.」

The vermillion-haired girl's will would always be with him. He could feel this emotional support, and looked up firmly at the cloudy sky.

「I'm a Scientist, so I will solve things I don't have experience with through trial and error— so talk it through with me, Yatori.」

Ikuta felt a presence nodding beside him. Ikuta then spoke with her for quite some time.

After the inspection of the building was complete, the Empress and the diplomatic team entered. At the same time, they received news of the Kioka's representatives' arrival. After finishing their preparation ahead of them, Ikuta and Chamille went into a tidy room designated by the reception party, and waited to meet the other party.

「— The Kioka group has finished their preparations. We will meet them at the main hall.」

At seven in the evening, a servant from the diplomatic building came to report. Ikuta and Chamille looked at each other and nodded.

「Alright. Let's go, Chamille!」

「... Yes.」

Chamille got up with a tense face. Ikuta took her hand and strode forth. After meeting with the diplomatic team, they went down to the first story of the diplomatic hall. The team included Trisnai, but he merely smiled without saying anything. The group soon reached

the corridor leading to the main hall, and passed through the beautifully decorated heavy doors.

「You are early. Welcome, cute Empress and Field Marshal.」

When they walked into an amazingly wide space, they were welcomed by a warm voice. They turned to the source and found an old lady sitting at the round table at the center. A buff middle aged soldier was standing behind her.

「... Nice to meet you. I assume you are the Pope?」

「I'm the leader of Ra Saia Alderamin, Jenancy Labutesuma. People also call me the Pope, but that is just a decorative title. You can call me Jena.」

In response to the Empress' question, the woman standing at the top of the Church of Aldera answered with a gentle tone, and stared at the girl with eyes that seemed to be boundlessly deep. Chamille tried not to be overwhelmed by her, and said in a measured response:

「... I'm impressed by your magnanimity. However, I can't omit my respect for the apostle of god. Allow me to address you as Pope Labutesuma as dictated by tradition.」

「Oh, that's a pity. Then I can't act intimate and address you as Chamille.」

Jenancy said as if she genuinely felt pity. In place of the awkward Empress, Ikuta who was experienced in speaking with older woman took over and said:

「Then how would you like to address me? Pardon me for invoking the scriptures— beautiful lady who 『is like a flower in full bloom frozen in time』?」

「Oh, you sure are a cunning linguist. Does addressing you as Lord Solork upsets you, Youngest Field Marshal in the history of the Empire?」

「Well, getting closer to you will fill me with joy.」

「Hey you, don't get too—」

The soldier behind her wanted to protest, but Jenancy stopped him by raising a hand. She looked at the dark-haired youth nostalgically, then said quietly.

「I can see his shadow in your every move… You really are General Bada's son.」

Ikuta never expected the Pope to mention that name, and was dumbstruck. As if his silence was the cue, the last group of representatives entered from another door.

「Oh— pardon our tardiness!」

The ones who appeared with a cheerful voice were a middle aged man in a dark blue suit, and a white haired soldier behind him. The moment they saw the Pope, they bowed respectfully.

「Kioka Republic Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii, and Army Major General Jean Arkinex, we are here after tidying our appearance quickly in our rooms. Long time no see, Jena, you are as beautiful as ever.」

「You flatter me as always— unfortunately, you are the second one to say that, Ario. He already complimented me.」

Jenancy immediately answered in a friendly tone, and the Prime Minister opened his eyes wide.

「And in terms of compliments, he is more witty by using the scriptures.」

「How strict. Now that you mention it, I'm getting old, but I can't help being jealous of my quick witted love rival—」

The Prime Minister turned to the subject the Pope was looking at. Realizing that was Ikuta, he showed the smile of a politician that differed wildly from his actual thoughts.

「— You must be Ikuta Solork? Our Jean has been in your care several times. This might sound strange, but I feel you are a kindred spirit, even though this is the first time we met.」

The Prime Minister approached the youth and offered a handshake. He was considerate enough to offer his left hand since Ikuta's right hand had a walking stick. Ikuta shook his hand right away.

「A pleasure to meet you, Sir Kyakushii, I'm Imperial Field Marshal Ikuta Solork— and there's nothing strange about that. I don't feel like this is our first meeting too.」

They exchanged pleasantries, but both of them sensed that the other party was implying something. However, that would have to wait— Ario shifted his kind and gentle gaze from the youth to the girl he was acquainted with.

「Also— It's been a while, Chamille. I should address you as Your Majesty, but please forgive me for addressing intimately just this once. You were a cute girl during your time in Kioka, and now, you are so beautiful that I thought I got the wrong person. I greeted you a little late, but please treat it as me being bashful in expressing my intimacy with you.」

「... Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii...」

In contrast with his warm greeting, Chamille's response was icy. At the same time, the white-haired officer politely greeted the Pope he had not met for a long time.

「... I'm Kioka Army Major General Jean Arkinex. Pardon my presence despite my lowly status.」

「No one thinks you are out of place here, Jean. Your superficial humbleness doesn't suit the rising star who will shoulder Kioka's future. Ignore the eyes of others and proudly show everyone that the Insomniac Brilliant General is here.」

「I'm honoured by your words, Lady Jena. I apologize for not getting in touch after finishing my term as a foreign attached officer.」

「No news is good news, don't worry.」

Jenancy smiled magnanimous and looked at the young people one after another. At this moment, a deep voice came from behind her.

「I'm Ra Saia Alderamin Holy Army General Akgarpa Sa Domeisha. Unlike the talented young generals here, I'm just a slow old fool, pleased to meet you.」

General Akgarpa went silent after introducing himself. The Pope laughed with her back to him.

「I don't feel you are slowing down at all, General Akgarpa. And don't worry, not many people will forget about you after meeting you.

Well then— each nation's representatives have met with each other. Next, we will introduce the diplomats of each—」

「Hold it～～!」

Baam! The door which Ario's group entered previously was opened violently. The person who appeared was an old man and a youth wearing the signature white coats of Scientists. Anarai surveyed the hall unreservedly, then sighed in relief.

「Good, we made it! They haven't started the conference yet, Bajin! 」

「No, we are obviously late. We are intruders who totally spoiled the mood, right?」

Bajin could feel the pickly gaze from around them and retorted to the old man. Ikuta looked at the two of them in surprise and said on reflex:

「—Professor Anarai?」

It had been so long since he called the Professor by his name. The old sage turned his head at that, and opened his eyes gleefully.

「...Ikuta? Is that you?」

However, for a reason not related to the master disciple reunion, the situation turned tense. Jenancy silently watched the uproar with a smile, but there seemed to be an aura filled with rage and intimidation behind her as she glared at the Kioka Prime Minister.

「...Ario. Can you explain what's going on?」

Ario Kyakushii considered her demand for a moment, and pretended to be retarded as he introduced the new faces.

「Oh～ yes. This is a last minute entry of our diplomatic team, Professor Anarai Khan. Pardon me for reporting this so late.」

Seeing him divert the topic with his apology, the Pope's silent pressure increased with every passing second. However, the old sage

didn’t seem fazed at all. Anarai said loudly to the Pope with a grudge that had built up over a long time.

「I’m tired of running away from your church cronies. I think this is a good chance and came right here instead. As for my goal? It’s obvious— it’s to knock the heads of all you stiff brained priests and open your minds!

Since I’m here, then Science will direct this conference! Fufufufu, enjoy this show through gritted teeth, God— the Three Nation Conference will now truly begin!」

The Scientist’s declaration of war echoed in the wide hall. His words caused more impact than anyone else— this topped off the grand Three Nation Conference, and left its mark in this historical moment.



Credits

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